CONNIE LORING'S AMBITION

BY LILIAN GARIS

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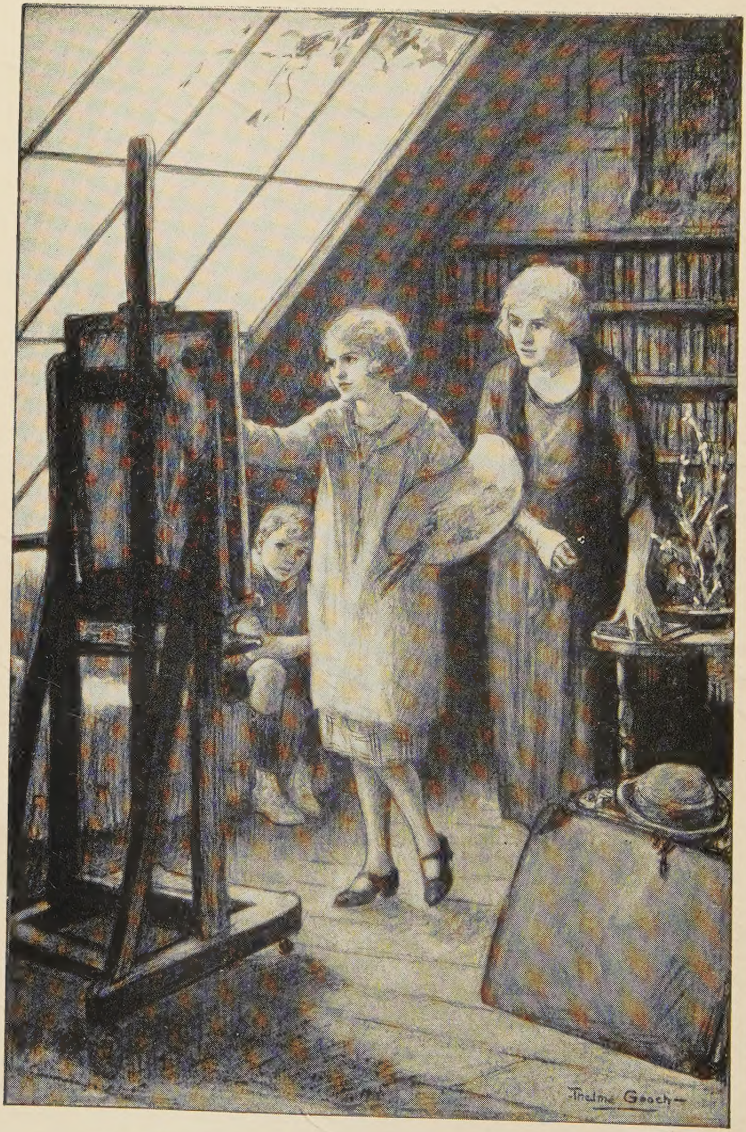

INTENTLY THE REAL ARTIST WATCHED THE WORK.

Connie Loring's Ambition. *Frontispiece*—(*Page* 200)

CONNIE LORING'S AMBITION

By

LILIAN GARIS

Author of

"JOAN: JUST GIRL," "GLORIA: A GIRL AND HER DAD," "GLORIA AT BOARDING SCHOOL," ETC.

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CONNIE LORING'S AMBITION
CONNIE LORING'S DILEMMA

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CONNIE LORING'S AMBITION

CHAPTER I

DISCARDING PRETENSE

"Of course I'll be Cinderella," agreed Connie, "but I'm not going to do all the hard work."

"But *she* did," pointed out Margery.

"She was foolish, then," followed up Connie, decidedly.

"Just the same, she won the prince," declared Jeanette, her voice mounting the scale.

"Well," spoke Connie again, prolonging the word to add importance to it, and turning her round face up to add more importance to that, "all I can say is that Cinderella must have been a fearful silly, and after all the ashes and everything, I can't see how she ever got her hands fixed up to go to a prince's table. Just imagine!"

"But she had to. The hateful folks made her do it," again recalled the literal Jeanette.

"Well, maybe she did," Connie replied vaguely, "but *that* only goes to show. I'd like the story better if she ran away and left those haughty old maids to sieve their own cinders. That would have been spunky, and then Cinderella could have met her prince in the woods on horseback, and he could have grabbed her off Cyclone——"

"Cyclone?" repeated Margery, now squatted comfortably at Connie's feet, just devouring every word.

"Cyclone would have been her horse's name, if he was any good, of course," condescended Connie. "For my part, I think Cinderella was foolish to be so easy with those horrible dames. But, of course, it was spunky of her to go to the ball. Now, if we're going to do it, we've got to get busy," Connie told her companions, "and I'll do the part as I think it is best. I'm not going to be a drudge, though." She was very decided about that.

"But how could we tell, really, whether there were any more fairies, just by trying to—to trap them?" Jeanette wanted to know. "And aren't we rather old to try a thing like that?"

"We couldn't hardly," said Connie. "But we're not *too* old."

"Then, what good is it?" insisted Jeanette.

"It's fun," sang out Margery, jumping up and clapping her hands. "Lots of fun, and let's," she begged. Margery was always ready for fun and more of it.

"I'm willing to, as I said," Connie promised, "only *I've* got to take care of my hands."

"Oh, yes, of course, you're going to be an artist," Jeanette almost scoffed, quite as if she meant instead of that, "Oh, yes, you *think* you're going to be an artist, but, of course, you only think so."

"You get your hands all paint," Margery pointed out, trying to fit the Cinderella work into Connie's schedule, "and that comes off."

"Paint comes off in turpentine, but cinders make scratches," Connie explained. "I'm not going to touch the cinders."

"Then, there's no use being Cinderella: it wouldn't be real," Jeanette insisted. "Anyhow, Connie, you always want to change things."

"Because I can," snapped Connie. "I'm not so stupid that I can't."

"Well, what I say is, do it right or don't do it at all," insisted Jeanette. "If we're going to give it a real trial we have got to be fair."

"Then *you* be Cinderella," suggested Connie, curling her lip at the very idea.

"With bobbed hair, how could I?" asked Jeanette. She seemed rather glad to be disqualified.

"You don't call my hair long, I hope," said Connie, defiantly.

"Well, it isn't long, of course, nobody's is; but it isn't a boy-bob like mine."

"Oh, what's the use of scrapping over everything?" spoke up little Margery. "You can wear lamp-wicks for hair anyhow. And it's only the fairy part that matters. Suppose you should see a real fairy, Connie, whatever would you do?" Margery fairly hugged herself at the blissful idea.

"I shouldn't be afraid," Connie declared. "I'd love to see one. But there couldn't be any," she demurred sagely. "Just imagine!"

The girls were planning, as was quite apparent, to test some fairy stories, that is, to follow the stories with their own ideas of an appropriate ending. School had just closed three days before the session of play now being held, and with Connie Loring as leader, Margery Richards, the youngest, tiniest and most excitable, Jeanette Duncan, the oldest and the "bossiest," according to the others in the group, the girls were bent upon doing something very exciting. Connie had

blue eyes and hair so yellow that the small boys called her Taffy. She was rather round and very dimply, but it was not her appearance that counted so much with Connie, it was her ambition. She was going to be an artist. That had been decided (by Connie herself) years ago, and how it started was rather interesting.

When she was four years old and the Lorings lived out in the country, right straight across the street from the schoolhouse, her father and mother decided she might just as well, and better, go to kindergarten, as to play spilling ink-bottles. So her father took her on his back—because she loved to be carried that way—trotted down the big hill in front of their old-fashioned home, and literally dumped Connie into school.

She decided to stay. She liked the pictures on the walls; they were low enough for her to see them plainly. Also, they were such gay pictures of geese, goats and goblins that they fascinated the youngest and newest pupil.

No record has been kept of the first few hours little Connie spent in school that day, but there is an account of the final half hour's excitement. Connie wanted to make a black picture, the sort she made at home. So she slipped up to the teacher's desk, got hold of the familiar looking

ink-bottle and carried it back to her very small desk.

Then she started.

She spilled a little ink and watched it "dripple." It drippled into her lap and she sopped it up with her lap clothes.

By this time a girl with very sharp black eyes spied the ink puddles.

"Teacher!" called out the other girl. "Look-it what she's doin'."

"I isn't," hissed Connie, spilling a lot more of the ink in her excited defiance.

"Oh, it's running into my dress," wailed another little girl, who was very prettily dressed indeed, but was unwise enough to lean too near Connie's danger.

"It isn't," again insisted the excited Connie, making a final effort to stop the black flood that was now running in so many directions it seemed to have fairly turned into a black liquid fire. It was catching onto everybody's clothes, and when the teacher reached the scene of disturbance her own pretty pink sweater became polka-dotted from the splashes.

But Connie didn't cry, in fact she fairly danced with glee because her sharp eye found in the blots a picture.

"A cow! A cow!" she cried gleefully. "Look! His tail is waggin' and his ear flaps! Oh, isn't he—lovely!"

The cow in question, made masculine by little Connie, was quite a cow indeed, but it decorated the back of a very white apron worn by a girl with no eye for pictures. She took the apron off to get a look at the piece of art. Later Connie's mother had a great deal of trouble getting her a new one. It had to be made—specially, and Connie couldn't even get the one with the tail-wagging cow, much to her loud regret.

So she wouldn't go to school at all after that for a long time, although her grandmother had given her a lovely paint-box for Christmas, and her father had arranged a room for her "work."

And yet the school episode was not the real beginning of her adventures in black and white, for it was a part of her family history that the blot on the lovely light living-room rug had been made by Connie, age three. She called that "a goosey."

So, any one knowing all this and much that followed, would have been sure to understand why every one knew that Connie Loring was going to be an artist.

How could she have expected to be anything else?

For all the long turbulent years which intervened between the first day of school and this present vacation, Connie had never lagged in her picture interest. She grew tired of many things meanwhile, but not of making pictures.

So her chums, Margery and Jeanette, knew it was best to recognize that before trying to take on anything else. To find out once and for all the truth about fairies they were actually going to take part in a fairy story. Not play it, no make-believe but real! To give their idea of a correct ending to the Cinderella story.

Connie was going to sit up in the dark, late at night in the most lonesome place they could find! She was going to be actually a Cinderella. She would wait patiently for the fairy godmother. But the prince!

Not even her imagination as a prospective artist could picture the prince coming.

That would surely have to depend upon the fairies.

CHAPTER II

DARING DANGER

It was too good to keep secret, although the girls making up the fairy test insisted it should be kept secret. That may have been why it spread so. At any rate, the boys in the neighborhood, as well as the girls, took so keen an interest in the plan that they did things not listed in the line of events arranged.

Michael Collins lived next door to Connie—if you didn't count the vacant house and the new garage—and Michael, called Mickey by every one except Connie and his proud mother, was a great friend of Connie's.

"I should have had a brother," she mourned occasionally, when there were so many errands to cover, "but Michael is almost as good. He'll grow up to be a handsome man, see if he doesn't, and then he'll fit his name."

"But his freckles," objected Jeanette. "They say his tongue has them."

"Nonsense," scoffed Connie. "Michael Collins only has freckles because his skin is fine, and as

for his tongue"—she paused in sheer disgust at Jeanette's remark anent the boy's tongue—"I wish some other folks knew how to keep theirs as well as he does, I mean still, of course, Michael doesn't tattle, ever."

But Jeanette wasn't taking offense at a little thing like that, in fact, she probably didn't even hear it, for she was busy making a costume.

"They wore such a lot of ruffles, those haughty stepsisters of Cinderella," she murmured, "that I thought, Connie, I'd just wear three skirts shortened up."

"That will be all right," assented Connie, who was acting as general supervisor. "You could just tie cords around and pull the skirts up ruffly."

"I could," replied Jeanette, "but I'll sew them up in big tucks. They'll stick out better. And besides, I don't mind sewing." She said this a little pointedly, for even at that moment a gilt safety pin stuck out from the edge of a button on Connie's sweater.

"Oh, sew them," tossed back Connie. "You have time to. You don't have to draw and do all that I do. I'm tracing a map for Mr. Demorest," she said lightly. "He's going to put it up in his real-estate office."

"Oh, is he?" repeated Jeanette, awed in spite of herself at that news. Mr. Demorest was the best known real-estate agent in Vinelea, and to make a map for him was surely an important commission.

"Yes," continued Connie, with showy indifference, "he likes my work."

"Don't forget to put the broken lamp-posts on it, Connie. Everybody says the broken lamp-posts around here are a disgrace. No town has them any more, and why should we?" spoke Jeanette, with commendable civic pride.

"A map hasn't anything to do with lamp-posts," scoffed Connie. "It is just an outline of Vinelea. He wants it to show the places for sale."

"What did Miss Holden say about our fairy test?" Jeanette asked, glad to escape further discussion.

"Oh, she thinks anything we do is cute. Just imagine! Cute! As if I would stay out in the dark alone to be *cute!*"

"Connie, are you determined to go to the old summer house?" asked her companion, a little anxiously.

"Where else could we go?"

"But it's dreadfully lonely and spooky——"

"That's the right kind of place to test fairies, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." Jeanette held up the ruffly skirt. It dragged at one side and she jabbed a pin in the offending spot. "But *we* won't stay, you see. We'll go to the ball early, and then you'll be all alone!"

"Until the fairy godmother comes. Then I'll have real good company," smiled Connie. She was waving a whisk-broom, probably thinking it was just a paint brush, and both girls were on Jeanette's side porch, although it was almost five o'clock in the afternoon, and would soon be time to set supper tables. Connie called hers a dinner table, but supper was the evening meal usually partaken of in Vinelea.

"But you don't really and truly expect her to come, Connie, do you?" debated Jeanette. The idea was so absurd.

"Of course I do; why not?"

"But a fairy——"

"There either is or isn't, so we've got to find out. And besides that, we will put a new ending on the story—maybe."

Jeanette looked a little alarmed at that declaration. She really hadn't expected Connie to do things so literally.

And the old summer house was in such a lonely place just under a big hill.

"Let's plan it different," she begged. "I wouldn't, couldn't let you stay there all alone, Connie. It wouldn't be safe," declared Jeanette with the air of one who knew.

"How are you going to stop me?" calmly inquired Connie, and the whisk-broom flew at the big flower pot, as it had been threatening to do for some minutes past.

"Why, Connie—I'd have to tell your mother."

"She knows. Mother likes the idea. She says it makes one brave to do things like that," retorted Connie gleefully.

"She does!" Jeanette could hardly credit this. Neither could she doubt Connie's word.

"Mother told me that many and many a time she got locked out, accidentally of course, when she was a little girl, and she went to sleep in the grape-vines. Nothing ever touched her but a snail! Just imagine! A snail walked all over her face!" and Connie roared laughing at the horrible idea.

"Ugh!" shrugged Jeanette. "But she was in her own yard likely. That summer house——"

"Is in a lovely back yard. So that makes it all right, doesn't it?"

"But it's so far down from any house. Almost like being on the other road. Oh, Connie," sighed Jeanette, dropping the flouncy skirt in real distress, "I'm not going to do it. Something might happen to you."

"There you go, Jeanette Duncan, backing out," accused Connie. "Well, you can be a quitter if you want to, but Michael Collins says a quitter is the meanest boy there is," and the honey-headed girl was plainly boasting of her agreement with Michael in his sentiments.

"You think too much of that Mickey——"

"He's all right," defended Connie, "and he does a lot for me——"

"Better make him your prince," scoffed Jeanette.

"Suppose I did——" and Connie's lip curled willfully.

"How funny!" roared Jeanette. "Mickey Collins a prince for Cinderella!"

"She might be glad to have one half as good, and I don't thank you, Jeanette Duncan, to make fun of my friends." Connie was indignant now.

"Connie, honestly, I didn't mean to. But can't you picture Mickey as a prince——"

"Yes, *I* can. *I* have imagination," claimed Connie. "But I suppose you can merely picture

him as a paper-boy." It was strange how those two girls squabbled and yet remained perfectly good friends, chums. But Jeanette was a little critical and Connie was decidedly willful, so their contact always made the sparks fly.

Jeanette was now, however, willing to be conciliatory, for she feared Connie's portrayal of the fabled Cinderella would end up disastrously.

"But, Connie," she pleaded again, "we never intended to go into this as you are going into it. We're not babies, and we know perfectly well there aren't any fairies——"

"How do we know?"

"Why, how could there be?"

"When we played Snow White at school, didn't we have a lecture on fairy lore?" demanded the implacable Connie.

"But that didn't mean there were any, really."

"I distinctly remember," said Connie, importantly, "that the principal said good and bad fairies may roam the world to-day, for all any one knows——"

"But he meant good and bad intentions," insisted Jeanette, becoming more and more anxious to divert her chum from the idea of isolation.

"Intentions!" Connie jumped up and jabbed her belt buckle in the wrong place, making her

dress yank up on the left side. "As if intentions had anything to do with fairies! Just imagine!"

"I don't believe you mean a single word you say, Connie Loring, and maybe you're not going to make a fairy test at all," suddenly declared the aggravated Jeanette. "At any rate, I'll do my part. I'm not going to be called a quitter, and if anything happens to you, just don't blame it on me, that's all," and Jeanette, too, took a vicious jab at her belt, quite as if girls' belts were the only things convenient to be avenged upon.

"I won't blame you, Jennie," said Connie, using the more endearing term to show her change of heart. "In fact, all that worries me is that nothing *will* happen to me. What's the use of going to all this fuss if nothing happens?"

"Then you won't stay out late alone in the summer house, will you, Connie?" Jeanette was more hopeful now.

"Suppose the fairy godmother comes around early——"

"Oh, Connie Loring!" was all that Jeanette Duncan could say. She despaired of bringing common sense into her chum's reasoning.

CHAPTER III

BELOVED ILLUSIONS

As a matter of fact, Connie was in rather a quandary. The whole thing had come about bit by bit, word upon word, until she felt she just couldn't back out, and she knew perfectly well there were no real fairies. That is, none that did more than make mornings beautiful, make sunsets glorious and stick the stars in place.

She wanted to believe all that. These beauties she considered more beautiful when fairies were imagined as having a part in the mysteries. But as for dressing up in Cinderella style, and staying all alone in a spooky old place waiting for a fairy godmother!

"How utterly silly!" she burst out now, on her way to the village for the grocery order, which that boy of Bakers' would be sure to be late with —if it were left to him.

Then the fun of it tickled her fancy. She could fool the girls, that is she could keep her plans secret. Jeanette was frightened, because Jeanette had proposed the whole thing. But of

course, *she* would only dress up as a stepsister and go off to the dance—to her own front porch, but Connie was to be Cinderella; she would have to find a prince and a fairy godmother.

A pattering of bare feet on the pavements behind her broke in upon Connie's musings. She turned to see Michael grinning in his usual happy way.

"Oh, Michael," she greeted him, "you're the very boy I want. Where are you going?"

"To Bakers'."

"So am I. We can talk on the way. You know about the fairy test——"

"Silliest thing ever was," declared the matter-of-fact Michael.

"'Course it is," agreed Connie; "that's what makes it so funny."

"Funny? How?"

"I'm to be Cinderella."

"What's funny about that?" Michael was frankly admiring the girl beside him.

"But just imagine——"

"I am. What?" Funny how boys could say so much in one word.

"I don't mean how I look," Connie tried to explain, "but it's being left alone, out alone in a scary place."

"What do you mean, left out alone?"

"Oh, Mickey," sighed Connie, falling into the little name he was so well known by, "can't you see? Didn't you ever read Cinderella?"

"Cinder-ella! I—should—say—not!" Mickey's voice fairly seethed with scorn at the very idea.

"Oh, of course you didn't *read* it. I know that," Connie hurried to correct. "But you know the story?"

"Yep. She flew away on a broomstick——"

"Michael Collins!" and it was now Connie's turn to affect scorn. "Why, you're thinking of the old woman who went up so high. Cinderella married the prince, you know."

"She did? There's the boys. I've got to go. See you later. S'long——"

"Mickey——" as he all but escaped.

"Yeah?"

"I'm counting on you, you've got to help me out."

"How?" He stepped back politely—for Mickey.

"Could *you* be the prince?"

"Me?"

"Yes, why not? I know you the best——"

"A little fellow like *me?"*

"That doesn't matter. Princes are small, sometimes. And you've got a real princely name —Michael."

This sounded convincing. Michael Collins stretched up a little on his bare legs and threw his coppery head up higher. Connie had always insisted that Michael was a name to be proud of. And Gorham's big police dog was called Michael, too; after some foreign nobleman they said.

"You know, Constance," he said, grinning in spite of himself at calling her that, "I'd do a whole lot for you."

"That's what I thought," said Connie coquettishly. "Well, then it's settled. And it's a real secret. You're not to tell a living soul."

"You bet I won't," agreed Mickey, as he turned again to meet his pals.

Thus further into the plot Connie found herself. Now what was she going to do? She couldn't go back on what she had said to Mickey. He would have to take part—be her prince!

She laughed outright at the idea. It was growing funnier and funnier. Little cut-up that she had to admit herself to be, she hadn't counted on anything like this.

She chuckled! Now she would scare Jeanette.

She would insist upon staying out alone in the dark (with her prince in the background), and wouldn't the girls think her brave?

It was delicious. How she loved to play such tricks on the nervous, fussy ones! And there was Geraldine Tucker, afraid to walk up from the village when it wasn't really dark, just getting dark.

Stumbling into Bakers' store, because she hadn't noticed all the paper boxes Sam had been sweeping out and left halfway there, Connie was too absorbed in the plot to notice Molly Sheehan at the butter counter. But Molly saw Connie. And she greeted her effusively.

"Oh, hello, Connie," she gushed. "Yes, Sam, two pounds of the best and don't scrape the tub. Connie," Molly returned to the girl in the blue gingham with the hand-stitched cross-bar border, "I heard *all* about it."

"Well, I'm glad of that," replied Connie, laughing, "so *you* can tell me. Go ahead."

"You're always joking," and Molly gave Sam a dollar bill. "You know I mean about the fairy game."

"Which fairy?" teased Connie. She loved to see Molly get flustered, it made her stutter so. But Molly wasn't going to be tricked this time.

"I suppose you told Mickey all about it," she retorted. "He's sure to know—which fairy," suggested Molly, slyly.

"But he didn't. He thought Cinderella rode a broomstick!"

"He never!" and both girls burst into such a gale of laughter that Sam was for taking up his broom again instead of waiting on Connie.

"Just imagine." This was Connie, of course. "But, Molly, it's going to be great, really."

"Give Sam your order, he's just listening," and Molly put her change in her purse. It was only a few cents, but she wasn't buying candy, in fact she forgot to.

Molly was one of Connie's favorites, she wasn't like Jeanette, always scrapping. So the two sauntered off together as soon as Connie had received her goods from the indifferent, shambling Sam.

As Connie heard herself talk, details of the play formed themselves almost without effort from her. It was surprising. She couldn't work it out at all before, and now it was working itself out.

Molly was simply thrilled.

"You see, I must keep some parts secret,"

Connie explained, to save herself from acknowledging her own inability to even guess what would happen when the fairy godmother should appear, if she should.

"It's fun anyhow," applauded Molly with real appreciation. "And you are sure to do something—something great," she wound up politely. She loved Connie.

"It will be great, whatever it is," laughed Connie, "but don't let's talk any more about it. I'm just sick of it," and she offered Molly one of her cookies. She had bought three cents' worth.

After that Connie knew she would have to become more secretive, if she expected to live up to her friends' opinion of her. She would have to do something great! And all she had toward the doing was her old, ragged dress; that was the easiest thing of all to get because it was simply a dress of her mother's, all slashed up with the scissors. Margery had done the slashing, while Connie painted a white bungalow apron with the craziest colored stripes, like an awning after a storm.

So the costume for the cindery Cinderella was ready, and as for the prince, he was sure to be

on hand. The real worry now was the fairy godmother. Connie felt obliged to produce some one to play that rôle; but who could?

It was the next day after she had given Molly and Mickey her confidence (up to a certain point) that she decided to prepare her mother for the experiment. Mrs. Loring was a busy woman, and, like so many other noble mothers, she managed to earn something to supplement the income left by her husband when he died from influenza a few years before.

Mrs. Loring wasn't exactly a dressmaker, but she made beautiful things, and fortunate indeed was the one who could obtain her services. She was artistic, which might account for Connie's tendencies, but she was also practical. Connie had her own duties to perform, and she knew she could offer no excuse for slighting them.

No girl worthy the name would attempt to deceive her mother, and Connie Loring was as true a girl as might be found in the state of New Jersey, where Vinelea, the little town over the Orange Mountains, nestled comfortably and lent a spot to the Lorings for their pleasant little home.

But Cinderella would have to be out somewhat late, that is, later than usual, and the fairy-test,

by which the play had become known, would have to be enacted in some lonely, or somewhat lonely spot. And now Connie was confronted with arranging these important details with her mother.

"That will be splendid, Constance," her mother assured her, after Connie had unfolded the general outline. "You little girls must do something during vacation, and this sort of play makes you think as well as work and play."

"Yes, Mother," replied Connie, "and I've promised to wait alone for the fairy godmother. She won't come of course——"

"But she might," interrupted Mrs. Loring, always ready to offer encouragement. "Wouldn't it be wonderful, dear, if she really did!"

"Mother!"

Mrs. Loring laughed lightly and held up the rainbow rosette she was making, to get a critical view of it.

"We mustn't lose faith in the fairies, they're such good friends, even to dream about," she said.

"I know, Mother; that's how I felt. Then I can stay out until nine, if it isn't too dark?" asked Connie, anxiously.

"With the other girls? Yes, that will be all

right," assented the mother, continuing her dainty handwork.

"You see," faltered Connie, "Jeanette, Margery, Molly and a lot of others will leave me—they're supposed to leave me all alone," she explained cautiously. "But Michael is going to stay with his big dog, Prowler. They won't be *in* sight, but near enough——"

"Connie, what are you talking about? Where are you supposed to be while all this is going on?"

Trying to smile and look indifferent, Connie picked up the spool basket and began winding ends.

"Just down in the old summer house, that's only right back here. You could easily hear me if I called. But Michael is going to stay at the apple tree, and I'll promise, Mother, only to stay down there long enough to prove to the girls that I'm not afraid. And, of course, to play the game out."

"Dear," sighed Mrs. Loring, "don't they know by this time that you're not afraid?"

"Well, Jeanette is afraid and she begged me to just make believe instead of acting it all out. But what kind of test would that be?"

"I agree with you, dear, the real test must be really tried out. But I don't want you——"

"First, we were going to have Pierson's barn, but I thought you wouldn't like that," conceded Connie in an effort to meet her mother's reasoning.

"Pierson's barn! In the dark! No, indeed——"

"But the old summer house——"

"I'll tell you, Babs, you just run down there now and I'll sit right here at the window. You call me, not a shout, you know, just a call, and see if I hear plainly——"

Connie was off before the instructions had been completed. And when she called, her mother answered with the familiar "Woo-hoo!" for the old summer house, while not on the same street with Mrs. Loring's home was only separated by a lane —the back of her property and that of the more pretentious places on Mountain Road running together in the rear.

Mountain Road was the scene of many handsome residences, and the extensive grounds ran clear over the hill, in a neighborly fashion going to the humbler places on Woodland Avenue.

So it was arranged, much to Connie's relief and to her mother's satisfaction. There could be no danger in the girl hiding in the summer house

in the early evening, with Michael and Prowler standing guard.

Connie, really, had more confidence in this guard than "in a troop of soldiers," she told her mother, who again agreed with her daughter's enthusiastic plans.

CHAPTER IV

ACT ONE SUCCESSFUL

So it was all right, everything was arranged and the night of the grand fairy test was finally at hand.

Michael was taking his orders now from Connie.

"Be sure to have Prowler on the chain," she directed, "or he might run off. And honestly, Mickey, I'm afraid it is sort of spooky under all those trees at night."

"Don't you worry," assured her champion, "we'll be there—me and Prowler. He's that kind of dog that likes to do things like that."

"Like what?" Connie asked, quite unnecessarily.

"Oh, you know, big, important," Mickey managed to say, although Connie knew perfectly well what he meant in the first place. "And don't you worry," he repeated again. "I'll see that your fairy godmother gets there."

"Mickey! You're just teasing. There isn't going to be any——"

"Just you wait. You'll be surprised," and he really seemed to mean it!

"Oh, but this is getting mysterious," chuckled Connie. "I can hardly wait myself. Now run along, princie," she added gayly, "and don't fail me!"

The sly twinkle in Mickey's blue eyes betokened anything other than failure. Never that, where his true friend Connie was concerned. Her confidence was well placed, without a doubt.

An hour later there was great commotion on Margery's side porch. The first act was to be given there, so as to save Jeanette's porch for the ball.

All over the side lawn had gathered the girls from the entire neighborhood, and there was also a sprinkling of boys, although they were especially privileged to attend. The performers themselves were sequestered in Margery's dining room, the family having been generous enough to finish their meal by seven o'clock to make room for the affair.

A big porch screen that pulled up and down made an ideal curtain, and as it now was pulled up by unseen hands there was disclosed—Act One: Cinderella!

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" came the encore chorus from the thrilled spectators, for Cinderella was made up true to the fairy book picture, and Connie never even smiled as she sat there. The slashed-up skirt looked bedraggled and disconsolate, if a mere skirt could look that way, and the painted waist was too terribly startling to describe. Connie's face was painted gray—with some beauty paste obtained by Jeanette in some mysterious way, and this was heightened in spots with daubs of awful bluish paint.

She looked dreadful!

Poor little Cinderella, the drudge, the outcast! Her hair was its own pretty honey-color and nothing could spoil that, although Jeanette had daubed vaseline on it; but altogether Connie as Cinderella really looked the part, the very worst part any Cinderella ever could have looked.

At her side was a scrub pail and brush, a broom and dust pan and some old clothes. Certainly she must have been fearfully imposed upon to have to do so many kinds of work at one time. But the "props" added materially to the scene.

Those viewing the spectacle seemed to have entered heartily into its spirit, for not even the

boys made any racket; they just waited, eagerly, expecting something wonderful would happen at any moment.

It did. Jeanette as one haughty stepsister, and Irma Lawrence as the other, presently flounced through the door, wrangling orders at poor little Cinderella, like so many bricks thrown about her head.

"Here you!" cried Jeanette. "Get up and hook my frock," and she turned to the child surrounded by the implements of menial labor, like a veritable old vixen indeed.

"My bonnet!" demanded Irma. "Fetch it quick, and see that you don't tarry. We'll be late for the ball. You lazy child——" and she threw a newspaper fan at the child, who dodged it and rushed first to hook up the horrible old waist Jeanette was partly encased in, while she trembled beneath the scorn of Irma waiting for her bonnet.

The haughty stepsisters were dressed in so many ruffles and such abundance of furbelows that the wigs of lamp wicks piled high on their heads (having been dyed brown in strong coffee) looked like mere buttons on top of rag-bags.

But the play went on. And Cinderella was the object of pity, of sympathy and of compassion, the audience feeling real sentiment, not for Con-

nie, but for the pathetic figure she was made to represent. No one wanted to see an innocent girl thus put upon.

After some minutes of this the curtain fell, Jeanette's brother Tom doing very nicely with the pulleys and cords, and the curtain responded promptly to his demands.

Then Marion Steele stepped out and made an explanation. She told the audience that they were playing Cinderella "to while away a pleasant hour," and that the next scene would move to Jeanette's porch down the street for the ball.

Would everybody move along quietly through the front way? The performers were going by another route for safety.

They would and they did, for down at Jeanette's the phonograph was already going at a rate to insure a lot of fun; besides, there would be some refreshments for the invited guests.

But Cinderella! She wasn't going to the ball; instead, the audience watched her wend her dejected way down the path to the lane, and then out into the grounds that surrounded the old Pierson estate.

There she was to stay all alone, Jeanette tremblingly announced, to watch for the fairy godmother.

"Why does she go out there in that lonesome place?" asked more than one boy, many of whom objected to the heroism.

"How else could she make a real fairy test?" Margery wanted to know. "Besides, her prince," she whispered, "is going to keep watch, and he has Prowler with him; so there!"

But they were not satisfied with Margery's explanation. Also, they wanted Connie to come along to the party. She was always so jolly and never failed in inventing good fun games, they felt sure they would miss her.

The demand for her finally grew so insistent that Jeanette had to shout out the details of Connie's adventure.

"She is only going to stay a little while," screamed Jeanette, "and you know how romantic Connie is. She simply insisted it would be an insult to the Cinderella play not to give the fairy godmother her chance!" and she tried to laugh at the idea.

"Who's the fairy godmother? Why couldn't we see her?" demanded Kathleen Carroll.

"There isn't any at all," drawled Jeanette. "But Connie is so queer. She wouldn't be persuaded to omit the lonely watch while we're here at the ball. I even tried to have her mother stop

her, but—— Oh, well, you know Connie," she finished, significantly.

"She just might see a fairy godmother," spoke up Molly Sheehan, one of Connie's strongest allies.

"Oh, how silly! Molly! A fairy godmother!" scoffed Marion.

But the refreshments were being placed upon the little side tables, and the phonograph was playing the newest tunes—available in Vinelea, so Connie's adventure was allowed to rest apparently and temporarily.

The "ball" was not a costumed affair, only a few of the older girls, those from Jeanette's class, being in "fancy dress," but they, with their absurd relics from attics and other hidden home corners, lent decided color to the gathering, making of it more than the usual porch party, which might have been held on any other evening out there in the country village.

Vinelea is not so very country; in fact, it is a flourishing little place with all modern improvements, including flocks and flocks of automobiles. Among those families boasting of up-to-date cars were Jeanette's, Margery's and Geraldine Tucker's. Loring's didn't own a car, neither did Collins', but most all the others had some

sort of conveyance that went without the services of a horse.

Yet the young folks there were very unlike the young folks of most other places. They retained the little mannerisms of country folks, "dressed up" only on certain afternoons, not every afternoon, and even then still kept to the reverential traditions of having Sunday clothes for Sunday only.

The children now frolicking on Jeanette's porch were in their "teens," all of them, yet they were frankly enjoying themselves as children used to do—before children grew up so young.

"I say we ought to go get Connie," insisted Ted Manley, after he had sung himself hoarse trying to beat the phonograph, and had eaten his own cookies and Sally Martin's besides. "What's the idea! Leaving her down there in that dump?" he grumbled.

"But you'll spoil it all. Can't you understand, Ted?" argued Sally, who liked to talk to Ted and didn't care to have him run off after Connie. "Perhaps she isn't down there at all. She may be painting a picture in her own room," speculated the resourceful Sally.

So Ted was quieted and the game of "Mr. Smith Within" was again attempted. But some-

how every one's mind seemed to be working in another direction. They wanted to talk of fairy stories, of Cinderella particularly.

"Isn't it silly, that we big girls should care about fairy stories?" Isabel Carter remarked aloud. She was in the sixth grade and had a lot of sense, according to popular opinion.

"Fairy stories are fashionable," spoke up Molly Sheehan. "My teach says so," she qualified proudly, "says even the teachers read fairy stories——"

"But they have to," interrupted practical Martha Westlake.

"No, they don't either," contradicted Molly. "I mean they like to read them. You should see the fairy books my teacher has."

"Miss Harden? That young lady?" exclaimed Margery, who loved Molly Sheehan's teacher. She had often told Margery stories while doing her practice work.

But while the party was progressing indifferently at Jeanette's, a remarkable drama was actually being enacted down in the little summer-house bower, where Connie Loring waited for the appearance of her fairy godmother.

Mickey and Prowler were waiting also, keeping close watch over the girl who was determined to play out the game, faithfully.

CHAPTER V

A REAL FAIRY GODMOTHER

"ARE you there, Mickey?"

"You bet, and Prowler, too."

"Isn't this too silly? But it's nice and cool in here."

"Out here too," chimed in accommodating Mickey.

"Can you hear me?"

"Sure, shoot." Mickey was privileged to use slang, so he thought, at least.

"Well, I'm just glad to sit here. This is a lovely seat, and it's sweet with honeysuckle. I'm going to stay until—it's real dark," announced the modern Cinderella. Connie was really enjoying herself, and seated on the rustic bench in the summer house of an estate that wound over the hill, she was not in the least suffering any of the fairy story hardships which her namesake was said to be heir to.

"You just stay," called back Mickey. He wasn't so badly off either, for the deep grass was

sweet with clover blooms and he had Prowler alongside of him. And Prowler was not often allowed to go out with Mickey, for his master was a young business man and dogs were disliked by a lot of people.

"Do you suppose they're dancing at the ball?" chuckled Cinderella after a brief pause.

"Maybe. An' eatin' stale crackers. Jeanette never has any good refreshments like you have," declared the gallant prince.

"Just because you like our cake, Michael. Say, peek in here and see how dark it is. But don't let Prowler in. He'd hunt snakes—and stir them up," Connie imagined, picking up her tattered skirt, apprehensively.

"Dark? Out here too. But you just wait awhile. I mustn't go too near. You wait——"

"What for, Mickey? Think I'm silly enough to believe in *your* fairy godmother?"

"Guess you will when you see her," insisted the boy in the grass, just far enough from the summer house not to be too near it.

"When I see her I *will,*" called back Connie defiantly. "But not until then."

"That'll be time enough," agreed Mickey laconically. "Here, Prowler," he ordered, "you lie right down. Let the grass-hoppers alone."

Some minutes passed before either Connie or her watching prince spoke again. It was quite dark now, and Cinderella was secretly planning to race up to Jeanette's in "five minutes more," and so get there in time for refreshments, stale crackers or anything else.

The picture might easily have lured any godmother, fairy or otherwise. Connie, ensconced in her darkened bower, the leaves moving in weird shadows all about her, and she on the rustic seat, in tatters, dejected and forlorn. But smiling! Always smiling. And there was Mickey, her prince, sprawled out in the grass with Prowler's nose resting confidently on his knee. Mickey had washed up and dressed up some, that is he wore shoes and stockings in addition to his Sunday suit, and his unruly hair was soaped down cruelly. Prince or pauper, Mickey was loyalty itself. And mysterious!

He had been warning Connie not to joke too loud about fairies and not to laugh at them—they might hear her and be insulted, he suggested.

"You're superstitious!" declared Connie. "Fairies! The idea!"

"Superstitious nothing!" retorted Michael. "You better watch out."

Silence for a long time. Then Connie felt shivery.

"Mickey?" she called evenly.

No answer.

Then louder. "Mick-ey!"

Still there came no reply. This was strange. Could he have gone away?

Once more she called for the boy, who had seemed so near—up to this moment, but even then there was no answer.

Startled at being there alone, Connie gathered up her trailing garments and rushed to the summer house door.

"Oh!" she screamed, falling back suddenly. "What's that?"

"Your fairy godmother," came the reply, in a soft musical voice, as there appeared in the vine-framed opening a vision exactly like the picture in the colored fairy book!

At a glance Connie saw the tall pointed hat, the red cloak and even the bright red slippers. She looked quickly and saw also that the vision wore a golden mask over the upper part of her face.

"Who—are—you?" again demanded Connie, frightened into a state of panic at the sudden appearance of this strange creature.

"Dear child," spoke the fairy, "I am just who I said I was—your fairy godmother at your service," and she waved over Connie's head a small golden wand, thrilling the girl into actual breathlessness.

"But I—I'm only playing, you know," stammered Connie, "and I really don't believe in fairies," she declared, as if defending herself against further surprises.

"Why not, my dear?" How sweet the voice was! Not a bit like that of any one Connie knew in Vinelea.

"Why, fairies," Connie attempted to protest, "aren't real, of course. We girls merely made this up, and I was just going back——"

"Aren't you glad to see me? I *am* real, you see. Just touch my hand to make sure," ordered the strange creature.

Timidly Connie put out her own hand, and with a trembling she could not control laid it on that extended toward her.

"Yes," she faltered. "I know you're real, but not a fairy," she insisted, with all the voice she could command.

"But I *am* a fairy," repeated the stranger. "I am here to grant any of your three wishes. You may make three——"

"I only have one wish, ever," Connie was constrained to admit. "I always make the same one."

"Name it," said the lady, majestically, her wand raised above Connie's shaking head.

"I wish—to—be—an—artist!" Each word was spoken so slowly, so solemnly, that Connie hardly recognized her own voice.

"An—artist!" The musical tones rang out with an echo of surprise and pleasure. "What a glorious wish! And one that shall be granted. Tell your gallant Prince Michael to bring you to my palace in three days more, and there I shall unfold the secrets of art to you," declared the vision, sweetly.

"Oh," breathed Connie, "please! I don't want to joke—about being an artist. I must be one, I have always—said that," she murmured, still trembling and uncertain.

"Joke, my child! Indeed, no. That I shall not, for the craft is one to my own best liking. You shall be an artist and I shall direct you along the tangled path of beauty. Be not afraid, I am real, and I am also your fairy godmother. Go now to your ball and dance with your prince but tell no one of—your trip to my palace," spoke the strange one.

"But may I tell them—I saw you?" whispered Connie. She was still too startled to speak out freely.

"That you may, my child," replied the fairy. "But of our plans you must not speak. To become an artist is a life's work," and Connie thought that now she spoke as if she knew everything about being an artist. There was no pretense in her voice and it sounded so—convincing. "But," continued the fairy, "there are many joys and pleasures to be found along the long, long road. It must be lighted with the sunshine of love for your work, made sweet by the fragrance of sacrifice to its principles, and become as velvet beneath your fondling touch."

"Oh!" breathed Connie, fascinated by the oracle's pronouncement, "I want so much to be a real artist. If I only could——"

"You shall!" declared the fairy. She was towering above the little Cinderella, and seemed so strangely unlike an earth creature that her weird spell held Connie in throes of fascination.

"But now," the vision continued, "I must away. Trust to your prince, he is an honest lad and does naught but for your good. Little Cinderella shall have her wish, if she keeps the secret and —does her part. Adieu, dear child," she mur-

mured, almost like a gentle breeze, and, like a gentle breeze still, she floated out of the bower, the faint perfume of some indefinable fragrance wafting along with her.

She was gone!

Connie gasped and rubbed her eyes to make sure that the light which had shone from her wand had gone also.

"Oh! Have I been dreaming? Where's—Michael!"

The girl who had played at the fairy game stood there alone in the darkness now, her ears still tingling with the music of that beautiful voice, her eyes blinking from the sparkling light that radiated from the bespangled wand, and her senses suffused with the fragrance, the beauty, the wonder of it all!

"What could it have been?" gasped Connie. "Who was it?" she continued to question. Then looking about her, fearfully, she realized it was night and she was there alone. She must get her courage back and find Michael.

"Michael!" she called bravely, and scarcely was the word uttered than he and Prowler both bounded in at the door.

"I had to go, 'count of Prowler. He wouldn't hold back——"

"Did *you* see her?"

"'Course; now do you believe me?"

"Mickey—what, who was it?"

"Didn't you see? Your fairy godmother of course," declared the boy frankly. "Let's go. It's late. Wasn't she swell——"

"Mickey, you've got to tell me," and Connie pinched his arm, although she didn't mean to.

"Tell you—what?"

"Who—that—fairy—was!"

"Connie Loring! You're crazy. Didn't you see? Want me to make her vanish? Don't you want to be—an artist?"

"You heard what she said?"

"Some of it. But don't you worry," reassured the boy. "We'll fool them all. Let them eat their old stale crackers. Just listen to that jazz!" he sneered as they both ducked under the lilac bush where strains from Jeanette's phonograph dared to penetrate. "Maybe *we* haven't had a good time——"

"When I'm able," murmured Connie, assuming now the air of a fainting Cinderella, "I'm going to tell them—some of it. She said I might——"

"All right," interrupted the boy, snapping Prowler's improvised leash free and allowing the faithful dog to bound away through the fields,

"just follow directions and you'll be all right. Going up to Jeanette's now?"

"I can't. I feel—so—so queer. I've got to go home. Mickey—you're sure she was there really! I wasn't hypnotized, or anything?"

Michael's laugh must have been music to fairy ears—if there were any still about. "Real!" he repeated. *"You just wait!* I'm going to bring you to her palace. Didn't you hear?"

"When?" demanded Connie. They were now at her own side porch, but Mrs. Loring did not appear to be in the sitting room.

"I can't tell yet," replied Michael. "You've got to have patience. Going in?"

"I—don't know. I guess I'll go up to Jeanette's after all. I promised to go—you know."

"Sure, to the ball. You've got to go. Come along. I'll watch and see the fun. Won't they just howl!"

"Mickey, this is nothing to joke about, so please don't you—tell them anything. The fairy godmother forbade me to speak of—the visit to her palace, wherever *that* may be, so I've got to be very careful what *I* say. You have been my gallant prince, Michael," Connie said seriously. "I always knew you could be—princely, with your name, if you just wanted to."

"And you're—you're a wonderful Cinderella, Connie," declared the boy, his voice vibrant with admiration. "You'll have the wicked old maids beat to a standstill," he fumbled, unable to express himself in any other than boy's language. "Maybe they'll want to play your part next time, but it wouldn't do them any good," he declared emphatically. "Here's your strings, you dropped them," he reminded the girl, whose tatters were shedding along the friendly bushes that touched her as she passed them by.

"But you do know, don't you, Mickey?" she asked once more, at Jeanette's side gate.

"That she's a fairy godmother? Sure," declared the happy boy, confidently. "There's Margery; I'll duck," and he slipped away in the shadows.

CHAPTER VI

EXCITEMENT PREVAILS

ALL the racket and confusion fell into a sudden hush as Connie stumbled in.

"She—came!" she gasped, exhausted now beyond any pretense.

"Connie! What's the matter?" cried Jeanette, pushing her company aside to make room. "Whatever—happened?"

"Who—came?" demanded Molly Sheehan.

"Let her breathe. Can't you see she's fainting?" ordered Tom Duncan, manfully.

"Oh, I'm all right, now," faltered Connie, and if she had wished to make a dramatic impression there was no doubt of her flattering success. "I just felt sort of—swimming." She sighed again, dropping into the morris chair just made ready for her.

"You look it," admitted Margery, as ever cager for the thrill. "Please do tell us about it, Connie," she pleaded, nudging closer.

"Give her a chance," again Tom ordered.

"Something's happened. She isn't pretending now."

"You bet she isn't," chimed in Dick Lawrence. "She's seen a ghost, if it wasn't a fairy godmother."

"It was," pronounced Connie, tragically.

"What?"

"Who?"

"Where?"

The questions were deafening. But the questioners were in earnest, and no one could doubt Connie's sincerity. She *had* seen something! They all agreed to that.

Finally Jeanette, still garbed as the haughty stepsister, managed to restore something like order.

"If you will just allow her to speak and not crowd around so," she insisted, "perhaps she'll get her breath. Tom, please open the end window. And for land sakes, Ted Manly, shut that phonograph off—all the way. It will spoil that record——"

A few more similar orders from Jeanette, and Connie felt obliged to tell them something. She made her story more startling by telling it in snatches. There were no long sentences, just gasps, sighs and a few well-chosen words.

SHE WAVED OVER CONNIE'S HEAD A SMALL GOLDEN WAND

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"I almost died," she finally insisted. "Just imagine!"

"But *who* was she?" every one wanted to know.

"She was alive, for I touched her hand," continued Connie, while Margery shivered, delightedly. "She made me—touch it," Connie admitted next, still quite breathless.

"She—did!" Margery ejaculated, while the others looked daggers at the one who dared thus interrupt.

"Yes. It was smooth as velvet."

"What?" asked Ted Manly.

"Her hand, of course," snapped Molly Sheehan. "Did you think it was her—foot?"

Every one laughed at that, in spite of the seriousness of the moment. They must have quickly imagined Cinderella touching the fairy godmother's foot!

"Say," called out a familiar voice from a window above the morris chair, "what's the matter with refreshments? Cinderella just *came* to the ball, you know."

"Mickey Collins!" exclaimed a group in chorus.

"Where have you been?" demanded Molly Sheehan.

"Where there wasn't any eats," replied the boy, his grinning, good-natured face now framed

behind the window screen. "Better feed up Cinderella. She's been fasting too, you know."

"Come on in, Mickey," Tom invited politely, "and after we feed you maybe you can finish the story. Did you see—the ghost?"

"Ghost nothing," retorted Mickey, now within the room. "It was the real thing, the best thing there is in fairy godmothers," he finished with a flourish of his necktie end.

A spell of genuine silence possessed them all now. Mickey actually bore out Connie's statements.

And they had both seen a fairy godmother!

Dick Lawrence was the first to speak. He had a proposal to offer.

"If she's been down in the summer house she must be around there somewhere now," he declared. "Come ahead, fellers, let's hunt."

"Sure, come on," agreed Ted Manly, loudly.

"What kind of weapons?" asked George Tucker.

"Think you're all being funny, don't you?" snapped Mickey. "Well, go ahead, hunt all you like but you won't find her."

"How do you happen to know so much, Mike?" spoke up Tom Duncan. "Is this fairy lady a friend of yours?"

"Well, that's all right," Mickey still argued. "I suppose you don't believe there is such a thing. You just wait and see." This was Micky's stock phrase and it always seemed to carry mysterious meanings.

"Let's go out and scout, anyway," decided Dick. "Can't tell but we'd run into Jack-and-the Bean-Stalk."

"Or Old King Cole, the jolly old soul," added George. "I think I'd like him better than Jack."

"Think you're funny," again sneered Mickey.

"Why not? What are you so solemn about?" Tom Duncan wanted to know. Tom was plainly suspicious.

"Tom, can't you understand?" drawled Ted Manly. "Mickey's Cinderella's prince and he's got to be solemn. Just look at her, poor Cindy! She's all in——"

But the girls were not joking. Connie, usually the life of any party, had scarcely smiled since she came in. She was truly frightened. If the creature who had appeared in the bower had been human, who could she be? Connie kept wondering. Certainly she must have been human, but who in all Vinelea could act like that?

Pressing more lemonade and cake upon her

(the girls were all eager to serve the heroic Cinderella now), every one seemed to feel that her especial question would surely untangle the mystery—if only Connie could answer those questions. But she could not.

"And did you wish—make three wishes?" pressed the implacable Margery.

"Certainly I wished," replied Connie, before she had time to prepare herself against that time of query.

"What did you wish?" again demanded Margery.

"Now, Margery, you must not ask me any more questions," Connie warned, haughtily. "I gave my promise to the fairy godmother and I don't intend to break it."

"Then—you—believe it all!" gasped Jeanette.

"Certainly I do," admitted Connie. "How could I doubt it?"

"Connie Loring!" Jeanette's voice implied her utter inability to cope with such a situation. "Then, it isn't—our—game?"

"It's our game played truly," replied Connie. "I give you my word, girls, I am not deceiving you." She spoke firmly. "I have no more idea who or what that was than you have."

"Isn't it simply wonderful!" exclaimed Geral-

dine Tucker. "Do you think we ought to report it somewhere?"

"Report what?" demanded Connie.

"Well, she might be an escaped lunatic," surmised the sensational Geraldine.

"Escaped lunatic!" exclaimed Connie. "I never thought of that," and she seemed frightened anew at the very idea.

"Did she act like one?" pursued Geraldine eagerly.

"I never saw one—act," flashed Connie, more like herself. "But how silly! Of course she wasn't anything like that. You should have seen how graceful she was." (Again she was called upon to describe minutely the fascinating personality of her curious visitor). "And her voice, oh, her voice was simply heavenly," finished Connie, ecstatically.

"Then she must have been a real fairy godmother," declared Margery. "Why couldn't she be?"

"Aren't you going to take your tatters off, Connie?" invited Jeanette. Connie never had before received such marked attention from every one.

"No, I don't think so," murmured Connie. "I'm going home soon; I feel sort of—queer.

It was such an experience," and she threw her head back against the inadequate cushion.

"We'll all walk down with you, if you're afraid," proffered Sally, hopefully.

"And maybe she'll come again," ventured practical Martha.

"Oh, no. I'm sure she wouldn't," replied Connie, "and I'm not a bit afraid. I wasn't afraid while I was talking to her, either."

Murmurs of admiration and surprise followed that statement. Indeed, Connie Loring was the heroine of the hour.

The boys were back again, their hunt unsuccessful except in the added excitement of their voices and manner. They all seemed to be talking at once, and Mickey was the obvious target of their verbal attack.

"If you saw her why didn't you grab her or something?" Ted wanted to know.

"Why? What did I want to grab her for?" retorted the tantalizing boy.

"Suppose she's a crazy woman" (Ted seemed to share Geraldine's opinion), "and you let her get away like that?"

"Crazy! Then we're all something else," Mickey answered, not sure just how to reverse the qualification. "For she was certainly—swell!"

"Let's have some more music," proposed Dick Lawrence, looking hopefully at the empty lemonade pitcher. "As a ball, I think this here is an awful—flop."

"Don't you like it?" snapped Margery.

"Who asked you?" flung back Ted, disdainfully. Margery was one of the little girls who was always making herself heard.

"Well, you know," spoke up Molly Sheehan above the grind of the phonograph, "to play it all out Cinderella ought to run home——"

"And lose her slipper," Sally added.

"And her prince would have to fetch her a gold slipper——" said Nina Black.

"Gold? It was glass," declared Jeanette, which started such an argument that the only way to settle it seemed to be by referring to the old, old fairy story.

So they found the book and Jeanette read it all aloud to her enthralled audience, while Cinderella and her prince slipped out the back way and escaped—exactly as they should have done according to the story.

"Won't you tell me, Mickey?" begged Connie, upon arriving at her own gate.

"Now, Connie," he deplored, "I'm to take you to her palace. Isn't that enough?"

"But I can't wait to know," wailed the erstwhile Cinderella. She seemed more impatient than ever.

"Sorry," said the freckled prince, nonchalantly, "but guess you'll have to. I'll tell you just as quickly as I can," he hurried to add, however, "but I've got to find out myself first, haven't I?"

CHAPTER VII

THE RUSTIC POSE

CONNIE was glad that her mother did not happen to be around when she got back home. She had told her story so often she just couldn't feel like going over it again that night.

Besides, she was still pondering upon the mystery, and she couldn't get over Mickey's attitude.

"Just imagine," she reflected as usual, "his having such a secret. I couldn't expect him to break his word—I wouldn't ask him to do that," she pondered as she undressed, laid aside the Cinderella attire and prepared to go to bed—welcome bed. "And he seemed to know that she was coming."

This fact was most surprising to the girl, for Michael Collins was just a boy among boys. He attended strictly to his own affairs, went on his paper route mornings and evenings, caddied at the golf links, and if he had any especial weakness it might have been his devotion to Connie.

As a gentle breeze wafted in her window the familiar honeysuckle scent, Connie recalled again

very vividly all that the fairy godmother had said, particularly the promise she made.

"I know she meant she would help me to become an artist," she told herself, "but are there any artists around here?"

Like many pretty country places, especially those embedded in the lovely Orange Mountains, Vinelea had among its transient inhabitants students and followers of art. They came and went, taking refuge in the fine big houses or in the snug, complete home-studios. So that Connie couldn't be sure about the artists in her immediate vicinity.

"But if she was one she surely must also be an actress," was the girl's final decision, "for no one else could have dressed up like that and acted so perfectly."

The more she pondered the more fascinating the possibilities became.

"And I've got to keep it a secret," she told herself, "at least part of it."

Suppose the fairy godmother lived in some hidden place in the mountains! Suppose Mickey should conduct Connie to her cave?

And how the girls wondered! Hadn't her Cinderella game been a real success?

She needed warm water to remove that gray,

pasty stuff from her face, but she wouldn't go to the kitchen for it, so she tried cold cream and a good soapy lather, which seemed to answer fairly well.

Even looking at her own features in her own mirror, pictured that fairy to her now. The big red hat and cape, the sparkling wand—there must have been a real light in the end of that wand—and the big old-fashioned skirt! That entire costume was a perfect copy of the story book picture.

At last she dozed and finally slept, for the evening had been strenuous even for a girl with Connie's endurance. Her dreams that night were a curious mixture of paints and famous pictures, summer houses and a wonderful prince!

For some days thereafter the girls and boys of Vinelea talked of nothing else. It had become almost a fairy godmother town, with Connie as the star attraction.

But Mickey had not yet taken her to the palace. His grin was just as frank and funny, and his eyes just as merrily blue as ever, but he could not be persuaded, even by Connie, to divulge the secret which he was now generally known to possess.

"Pretty soon," he would reply to Connie's continuous appeal. "You—just—wait!"

Then Geraldine Tucker was giving a motor party one afternoon, and had as her guests Jeanette, Connie, Sally and Molly.

"No boys," she explained, "because mother is going along to chaperon us and she's always afraid of boys' pranks."

The Tuckers' big touring car was indeed a machine worth riding in, and this afternoon the girls each felt that an automobile tour over the mountains was the most of all recreations to be desired. Thompson, the chauffeur, drove the car, so that every one, including Mrs. Tucker, enjoyed the ride without being troubled the least by its care or direction.

The day was soft and comfortable as a lovely woolly blanket, and the beauty of the great outdoors lay over the hills like a gorgeous spread embroidered with daintiest flowers, on a green velvet, grassy background.

They had decided to take the back road and have lunch in one of the many wild orchards, as that plan would permit of a wading party in the pretty stream that stole over the hills, and it would also afford the girls time and opportunity for a romp through the woods surrounding.

The desirable spot was reached just before noon, and while Jeanette wanted to make camp

fire and have a regular Girl Scout picnic, the others decided against the plan, and, instead, opened the lunch boxes under a great old snarly oak tree, quite free apparently from bugs and crawly things that might have spoiled eating in the open.

The lunch box picnic is always perfect, it seems, and this was no exception to that rule. Mrs. Tucker had her fancy work along, and while the girls explored after lunch, she sat on one of the car robes and enjoyed her picnic in a woman's way.

"Don't go out of my sight," she warned her charges. "There are enough things around here to see. Just look at that pretty clump of evergreen trees! How unusual to find them intruding in a grove like this!"

"We'll all stick together, Mother, and call back as we wander," the joyous Geraldine assured her. "Thompson is right over there talking to a farm hand, and we're as safe as if we had a guard of state troopers."

"Very well, dear," her mother smilingly agreed, "but still I'll feel better if I can *hear* you."

"I should think," remarked Connie slyly, "you would feel better if you couldn't hear us. We make such a dreadful lot of noise."

But they had no time for smart sayings, for already Sally Martin was shouting about some wonderful discovery, which eventually turned out to be nothing more than a rotted tree stump covered with moss—Sally was like that about her discoveries. The next alarm came from Jeanette, who declared she had found a rabbit's nest and it wasn't anything but a crow's nest that had fallen from an old dead hickory nut tree. But it was a rare find at any rate.

Adventure they were sure to come upon, however, and as usual they were bound to meet it in the most unexpected way.

Jeanette had her camera along. She never went far from home without it, and Connie was, as ever, armed with an old exercise book to practice drawing in. Her greatest pleasure she found in that habit, and all the home books and unimportant papers bore evidence of its scope.

"Oh, just see that adorable fence rail!" shouted Jeanette, as if an old fence rail could be anything venerable. "We've got to have a picture of that. Who'll sit on it?"

"Who won't?" sang back Molly Sheehan, as she would have been expected to do. And at the challenge she led the race for the fence rail.

"No, we must have just one girl sitting right

in the middle between the two big trees," Connie directed authoritatively. "You see, there is a long clear place where we can get the light, then the big trees make sort of a frame."

"And you'll make a painting of it, I suppose," said Geraldine, pleasantly.

"No, but I'll take a few lines and when I get home I'll try to fill it out," explained Connie, modestly.

"Oh, is that the way you do it?" Geraldine replied. "I suppose when you get your fairy godmother lessons we won't see any more of little Connie Loring," she added merrily.

"Come on," ordered Jeanette. "That sun is just right for me. Who's going to ride on the rail?"

"Connie," suggested both Geraldine and Molly; "she always takes the best picture."

"Oh, no. Let some one else," objected Connie. "I want to sketch it."

"Molly then," said Jeanette, "and please hurry up. That sun slant is perfect."

With considerable fussing, fixing and altering, the model was finally posed on the old fence rail, and a very striking figure she made indeed. She was wearing an unbleached muslin dress that was stamped to be embroidered but wasn't. She had

on a big, soft straw hat that might have been trimmed but wasn't, so ferns were pinned on it for the picture, and, to make the setting perfectly rustic, Connie had dragged off one shoe and stocking while Geraldine did the same thing to the other, as Molly was not allowed to change her pose, shoes and stockings on or off.

"Sw-ell—!" announced Geraldine. "Oh, Connie, if only you could paint that!"

"Some day I'll be able to," declared Connie hopefully. "But stand over this way, Gerry. Jeanette is all ready——"

"Don't—move!" warned the photographer, for the model was wiggling her toes.

"Look—just a little—this way," ordered Connie, for again Molly threatened to spoil the pose by gazing heavenward.

"Now—all—ready!"

Jeanette's finger was on the camera spring, just ready to touch it when Connie cried out:

"Look—coming out under—the tree!"

"Oh, pshaw!" grumbled Jeanette. "Whoever is that?"

They all stared. Even Molly slipped down from the fence and hurried toward her companions, as if a snake had suddenly thrust up its slimy head.

A woman, a queerly dressed woman, had just glided out from under that old tree, and was coming up to the fence rail like some insidious, hateful thing. She was a gypsy, surely, for her dress proclaimed her as such, but what startled Connie was not that alone. This creature looked somehow like the fairy godmother. She was about as tall and as thin, and so oddly dressed!

A perfect spasm of disappointment gripped Connie. If this were her bower visitor how vain and foolish had been all her hopes?

"Let's run back to mother," suggested Geraldine in alarm. The woman was staring at them.

"I've snapped her picture," whispered Jeanette. "I thought I was taking Molly."

"What's the matter, Connie?" asked Molly, who was now in line with the others. "She isn't any ghost. Just an old gypsy——"

"I know, but somehow I did get a little scared, she came so suddenly," evaded Connie. "Let's wait a minute. It would look queer for us to run——"

But that was not why Connie wanted to wait. She wanted to hear that creature's voice. That she knew she could not mistake, for the fairy godmother's voice had been like music.

"Young lady!" came the call in answer to

Connie's unspoken question. "Get ye-ar fortune tol'!" and the voice was sharp, raspy, nasal and horrid!

A surge of relief enwrapped Connie. That was not the fairy godmother! And her hopes were not thus to be rudely broken. Her heart pounded joyously.

"Let's go back," she now herself suggested. "I don't like gypsies, and she looks—fierce."

"But our pretty picture," wailed Jeanette. "I never saw anything so rusticly lovely as Molly looked on that rail."

"Oh, my boots!" yelled Molly. "The old lady is hooking them! Quick, Connie, gather the sorkies whilst I glean the shoosies," she prattled, and together the two girls raced back to the fence rail, recovered the shoes and stockings, but didn't bother answering the woman who offered to tell them wonderful fortunes.

CHAPTER VIII

A PRINCE THERE WAS

THE day had been a complete success, even to the stone wall picture which was taken after the rail fence pose had been so rudely frustrated.

Molly had sat upon the stone wall and allowed her bare feet to dangle, although the girls warned her that snakes were apt to poke their heads out to see what was going on. When Jeanette had finished that rustic photograph there was a whole series of others snapped, including one with all of them together, for which the chauffeur snapped the spring, one of each of them separately for their immediate families, and various other assortments, pretty, if they only would develop as they had been posed.

But the sudden appearance of that gypsy woman had very much disturbed Connie, and she couldn't quite forget the queer feelings that accompanied the little shock. On their way home the girls still noticed her abstraction.

"I know," declared out-spoken Molly, "you thought it was the fairy godmother, Connie."

"But she wasn't," replied Connie, unsmiling.

"How do you know?" asked Geraldine, sharply.

"Oh, I'm sure. I knew her voice, especially. I have never heard a voice like—like that in the summer house."

They were silent for a few moments, each evidently considering the import of Connie's declaration. The beautiful country roads were unwinding like ribbons, as their car dashed along, and the automobile party was now winding its way back to Vinelea.

"I'd have a fit," said Jeanette suddenly, "if I really believed there had been a lady in the summer house and I couldn't find out who she was."

"But I'm going to find out," calmly replied Connie, tearing up a yellow daisy as she spoke.

"When? You believe everything Mickey Collins tells you," retorted Geraldine. "I don't see how you bother with such a freckle-face."

Connie's head sprang up defensively at that. "Michael is loyal; he never fails me and he always helps me," she declared, not realizing how dramatically she said it. "I'd believe Michael if he told me—the world was coming to an end."

"Hurray!" cried Molly, waving the untrimmed

hat. "Goody for you, Connie!" and she poked her reckless hand into Mrs. Tucker's ear, for Mrs. Tucker was sitting with the driver and Molly was on a little seat back of her. "But you see, Con, Jeanette wants to know the lady too," she continued. "Why shouldn't we all have a whack at wishing?"

"Now, girls," replied Connie, in continued seriousness, "I've told you all I can. You know I'm not fooling, and I wouldn't fool about my painting. I'm just as anxious as any one could be to find out about it all, but I've got to wait. Maybe I'll know soon."

"Let's hope so," replied Jeanette. "How could we ever imagine that foolish little game of fairy stuff would run into anything like this? But we won't tease you any more about it, Connie love," she added affectionately, for Connie and Jeanette were always chums. "We'll just wait and see—your mystery picture. Of course you'll paint one, first thing."

"Don't let's talk any more about it now," pleaded Connie. "I'm tired of it. But the gypsy woman did startle me. I should have been so dreadfully disappointed if *she* had turned out to be—the other one," she faltered. "But her voice settled it."

So they finished their auto-trip without further reference to the mystery, but for Connie the real excitement had scarcely begun. For Mickey was waiting for her when she jumped out of the car, and he made sly signs to her, which she instantly guessed meant something important.

"What is it, what, Mickey?" she whispered. He had his paper strap over his shoulder and a few undelivered papers were slipping from the heavy leather belt.

"To-morrow," he said, tersely. "We're goin' to-morrow."

"Mickey!" Connie could hardly utter the words that crowded to be spoken. "Where—is—it? *Where* are we going?"

"You wait." If Michael Collins had not possessed innumerable good qualities to excuse that tantalizing expression of his, Connie might have resented it just now. But she didn't. She didn't even remind him that she was waiting, and had been waiting patiently for a long time.

"You be ready," said the oracle next, "to-morrow. She said to come then."

"Dear me, Michael," sighed Connie, rather exasperated at his coolness. "You've got to come here and tell me about it. Think I'm going off on a wild goose chase——"

" 'Tisn't. It's real. I'll take you, all right. You just be—ready."

"When? What time? What will I wear? Where *are* we going?" fired back Connie, like falling down steps. "Can't you see there's a lot of things a girl has got to know?"

Mickey's smile spread all over his face, from the roots of his forehead hair to the grimy little gutter under his short chin, and from one freckled ear to the other. He seemed to be just swimming in an ocean of smiles.

"You wait——"

"Mickey! Don't say that again, please," Connie burst out. "That's all you say, just—wait. Now, if you don't tell me where we are going and something more than 'just—wait'—I simply won't go at all," announced Connie, not meaning a single word she said.

But Mickey was impressed. Two of his most important papers slipped right out of his strap, and if Connie had not quickly stuck her foot out to save them they would have dropped into the puddle, just made by the evening hose watering in her front yard.

"She's terribly busy," he began.

"Who is?" interrupted Connie.

"Mrs. Delamar, Madam by rights," reluctantly

admitted the boy, his big blue eyes fairly devouring Connie's face to see what she thought about his statement.

"Mrs. Delamar!" Connie repeated. "And who on earth is she?"

"She's the fairy godmother!"

It was out! Mickey fairly gasped in his excitement. And Connie gasped several times.

"Oh, Mickey!" she exclaimed, her eyes almost as wide as his own. "Is she really—it?"

"Not *it,* her!" corrected Mickey. "She's wonderful. Wait 'till you see her as she really is," he pointed out, proudly.

"But how can *she* grant my wish?" Connie wanted to know, grave doubts, instead of fond hopes, flooding over her with the final revelation.

"Can she? She's the swellest artist *you* ever saw. She's a peach," declared Mickey, "and she isn't pretending."

"Mickey, does she live in the big house over the hill?" asked Connie, breathlessly.

"Yep," he replied brightly.

"Oh, she's that woman that never lets any one in——"

"She lets me in."

"But everybody says she's sort of odd——"

"Isn't either. That's just everybody. Madam Delamar is great. Didn't *you* think so?"

"I couldn't tell, with her all dressed up. How did she come to do all that, Mickey?" Connie was somewhat calmer now.

"For me," he answered simply.

"How did you come to know her? There's Mother, hurry, tell me," she begged. "I've got to go in."

"I knew her ever since she came here," the boy boasted. "I bring her papers and magazines and you know that big dog? The pretty collie? Well, he lets me in and no one else can pass him."

"Did you—had you told her about our Cinderella play?" Connie continued to inquire, although she moved nearer the house.

"Yeah. And she thought it fine. She had everything to dress up in—used to be an actress, I guess," he reasoned. "Wasn't she—swell?"

"Wonderful," replied Connie. "Of course I knew she wasn't a fairy, I'm not so silly as that, but she spoke as if she meant every word."

"And she did." Michael Collins was being another sort of prince now. He was standing up loyally for another friend. "She'll do every-

thing she says—always does. I know. I have to send telegrams an' everything. She's an awful important artist."

"And we'll go to see her to-morrow?" Connie couldn't believe it.

"Yep. We'll go right after dinner—lunch, you know."

"We won't tell any one, Mickey——"

"Bet we won't."

"It'll be our new secret. I've got to go in. What shall I wear?"

"Your paintin' clothes, that funny big apron; you can carry that, I s'pose."

"My smock? Oh, I wouldn't take that the first day," demurred Connie.

"Well, you know best," conceded Michael importantly. "S'long. See you to-morrow——" and he was whistling before his mouth had a chance to close on the last word.

CHAPTER IX

AN ARTIST IN HER DEN

It was unbelievable that Madam Delamar, she whom all Vinelea regarded as too important a personage to even bow to, was actually going to talk to Connie about art!

And in her home! Why, no one, not even Mrs. Hays who always called upon every one who ever came into the town, not even the indubitable Mrs. Hays had dared to call upon Madam Delamar.

"Mickey's just wonderful," Connie was reflecting when, after dinner that evening, she planned to make the exciting disclosure to her mother. "He has more friends than boys who are much prouder and who come from more prominent families."

Connie had actually emptied her closet, in her efforts to make sure of which dress would be most suitable for the early afternoon call. She liked her green—it was always so fresh looking, but then it had that organdie collar that rolled up no matter how well it was pressed down. Her blue gingham was ready and pretty, but then, for

afternoon, that might be a little plain. Her parrot blue sweater and gray flannel skirt, that would be best, because it made a sport suit and it looked stylish. Yes, Connie would wear that, so the other discarded garments were hung back on their hooks, not perhaps as smoothly as they should have been, but Connie was excited.

And strange to say her proposed visit met with no opposition from her mother.

"Madam Delamar? How lovely?" Connie's mother exclaimed. "Indeed she is a real fairy godmother."

"Do *you* know her, Mother?" was Connie's surprised question.

"She attended the flower guild and brought the loveliest blooms for the hospitals," Mrs. Loring said. "But as for knowing her—she is so formal and so different from the other ladies, I guess no one felt as if she were really a neighbor. She's quite an artist, I believe, dear, and this may be a wonderful chance for you."

"And she went to the flower guild?" Connie repeated, incredulously.

"Yes. Surprised every one by walking in with arms full of blooms," Mrs. Loring exclaimed. "She's a very handsome woman. Folks say she has been an actress."

"But isn't she sort of a—mystery?" Connie didn't want all her fairy godmother illusion to vanish like that.

"Vinelea makes a mystery out of any one who doesn't parade her business all over," answered Connie's mother. "If people would keep as busy as some of us have to, they wouldn't have time to concoct all these mystery stories. Michael is going with you, isn't he?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. He goes there all the time. But he said I could bring another girl if I wanted to," Connie mentioned, reluctantly. "But I don't want to, Mother, for then I could not talk about pictures all the time. She would be sure to interrupt."

"Mrs. Delamar appears to be a real lady; she shows it in every move. You go along with Michael, Constance, and make your first call short enough to be polite, you know," was her mother's final advice.

So it was settled, but Connie grew more and more excited as the night passed, the next day arrived, and hour by hour her visit to the house over the hill became more imminent.

The girls came around in the morning on their way to the library, but she refused to accompany them. She couldn't remember any book she

would like to have had, although Molly suggested several.

"Too busy to read these days," she told them, without hinting at her latest interest.

"Don't you want to see the pictures?" asked Jeanette. "We're going to get them and Molly may devour them before we can get out here again."

"My bare feet are going in the beauty contest," giggled Molly, "and maybe they'll win the prize."

"The stone wall can't be beaten anyhow," added Geraldine, "and the poison ivy will look lovely and snakely, see if it doesn't. But, Connie, you are surely up to something when you won't come along. You look positively feverish," joked Geraldine.

"If you don't hurry I'll look fittish," declared Jeanette, "for I'm having a fit right now. Do you realize that I have to go into Newark this afternoon? To shop, if you must know, and I'm hoping for another hat, if that interests you. By-by, Connie love, see you to-morrow," promised Jeanette, leading the small procession out from Connie's porch.

Nothing now mattered but being nicely fixed up for the important call, and Connie had done so many unusual things—extra—she just wondered

if they had added to or possibly detracted from her appearance.

But she was finally ready and when Mickey's familiar whistle came on ahead of him, she rushed out without daring to take another look in the glass.

"Glad?" asked the boy. Connie hoped he would say she looked nice.

"Of course," she replied. "Mother has met Mrs. Delamar." This seemed worthy of Mickey's attention.

"She has? Well, you'll meet her too, pretty soon," said Mickey. "I'm fetching her some blackberries. She loves them."

"Oh, should I have brought anything?" Connie asked, anxiously.

"Naw. I just bring her berries. She's got everything there is, you know. She's awfully rich."

Passing the summer house—they were going over the hill—the girl and boy recalled their first meeting there with the mysterious fairy godmother. Connie insisted she had never been fooled for a single minute, to which Mickey replied that she didn't have to be, because there wasn't anything to be fooled about.

"Don't be afraid of Shaggy," Mickey said as

nearing the big house the dog appeared and barked a little uncertainly. "He's just playing. Come on, Shag!" he called, and the great collie answered promptly and happily.

"Isn't—he—lovely?" ventured Connie. "I never saw such wonderful fur."

"Gets more washings than a baby," replied Mickey. "We go to the side door. That's where the studio is."

A Japanese servant jumped out of the big door as their step sounded on the gravel walk. Instinctively Connie edged closer to her champion.

"Helloa—Mick-ell-lee," was what the Jap seemed to say in greeting. Connie thought he looked at her questioningly.

"Hello yourself, Chang," said Mickey easily. "Is Madam around?"

"Cert'ly. She tell you bring gell?"

"'Course," answered Mickey, his voice deepened into something like a growl. "S'pose I bring her if she didn't ask me to?"

All this time Michael Collins was wending his way toward the door with Connie cautiously following him. It was very evident that visitors were rare here, and when they did come they were obliged to show their credentials to Chang.

But not so with Mickey: he seemed to have the right of way.

"Come ahead," he said aside to Connie, as if she could come any closer, ahead or afoot.

A voice, *the* voice from within the house gave Connie a feeling so acute, it actually made her sense the creeps of gooseflesh.

"Come in, Michael," the voice said, "and bring little Cinderella."

Connie's heart jumped! Here was her fairy godmother at last! And she was wearing an artist's smock!

"Welcome, Cinderella," said she now known as Madam Delamar. "I have been wanting you to come for days, anxious to see you as the girl you are—but, my dear"—and the brown eyes in her pale face flashed seriously—"I have been so cruelly busy."

"This—is—lovely," was all Connie could say although she had several real speeches ready. "It is so good of you to let me come now, Madam Delamar," she added rather well considering her nervousness.

"Our little prince sees to it that the fairies do not forget their friends," said the lady in the blue linen smock. Connie thought her white hair went beautifully with the delf blue, and she loved

her tall, slim figure. "Come right in," continued Madam. "Mickey, you may give Shaggy some exercise. Just see him sniffing for stones."

Michael took the hint and raced off to throw stones so that Shaggy could retrieve them.

And then Connie was ushered into the sanctuary of a real artist.

CHAPTER X

WISHES AND REALITY

THE room was filled with pictures and art materials. There were three easels set up over near a window that slanted from a roof, built in that way to bring the light from the sky.

And there were low couches arranged like window seats, with cushions, flocks of them, and low tables just where one could reach them while resting upon a comfortable couch.

Connie knew this was how Madam snatched her rest, and seeing the pictures partly done and some only outlined, the visitor tried to realize how much hard work it really must mean for one to become a successful artist.

"Sanctuary!" was the word that came to Connie's lips. "I am in—a temple of art!"

To a girl who had dreamed of pictures since she was a tiny child, this sudden realization of the art of making them, and the thrill of being in the presence of one who actually made them, was naturally overwhelming. It was almost as if all

the wishes of her entire life had suddenly come true for Connie.

"You are just a little girl, my dear," Madam was saying, "but not too young to begin. I was not older than you—but——" She broke off suddenly as if brushing away an unpleasant memory. "Let me see what I can show you. First, we must visit with the pictures I have here. Just a few; I only came out from New York this summer so that I might be very quiet to execute an important commission."

"But I don't want to interrupt you, Madam," Connie said with genuine concern. "I feel I shouldn't——"

"You may inspire me. Michael is a real joy, always, the way he comes bouncing in with his funny whistling tunes. And the way he argues with Chang!" She raised her hands in mock horror at the idea. "I tell you, my dear, they often save me from a fit of melancholy. Just painting here without one's friends is lonely work sometimes."

Connie wanted to tell her how much the people of Vinelea would love to call, but felt too timid to presume in that direction. Madam was taking a big, black portfolio from a queer wooden basket that hung upon an easel, and this, Connie sup-

posed, contained the pictures they were to "visit with."

"Madam," she began, now easily losing some of her self-consciousness, "I want to tell you how much I appreciate your—your fairy godmother play. You were perfect," Connie declared, "and if I hadn't been as old as I am I would surely have believed you were actually a fairy."

The lady laughed lightly at that speech, and even her laughter seemed like music to the visitor.

"As *old* as you are," she repeated. "Why, my dear, you are very young, indeed, just a child, and as for fairies"—she threw her regal head up and held it high, like a piece of statuary—"you surely do not doubt fairies now, do you?" she asked smilingly.

"Oh, no. This is very real," agreed Connie. "But I wonder if I can ever do anything like—any of these?" she pondered aloud, for she had been gazing spellbound at the outlines and drawings in the folio.

"Why not? You love it well enough to work very, very hard?"

"Indeed I do. I have always felt that no play was more pleasant to me than—trying to make pictures," replied Connie. "And," she added

whimsically, "mother always says the sicker I am the more I want to draw. You see I used to have awful colds——"

"I know," interrupted the artist. "And that is something of a test, too, for we only turn to things we love truly when we need sympathy. Let me show you a scene you will probably recognize," suggested Madam brightly. "It is a little bit from one of your mountains——"

"Oh! The poplar patch!" exclaimed Connie, as the cover was drawn from a big easel, and there stood revealed a painting of that spot at the foot of the mountain known as the poplar patch. "How lovely!"

"Poplar Patch! What a quaint name? I shall have to name the picture just that," declared Madam, making a little pencil note on a pad that stood on one of the many small tables. "And you like it?"

Connie did not venture to speak. She just looked from the picture to the face of Madam Delamar, and that look expressed greater admiration than any words could have conveyed.

"The trees," she said finally. "That bark looks as soft as—as velvet, or sort of like an animal's skin," Connie murmured, trying to describe the painted, mottled bark on the poplar

trees that did, indeed, look like soft gray fur with darker patches.

"You have the discerning eye," said Madam seriously, "I knew that when I saw you as little Cinderella."

"But how ever did you make up so perfectly as the fairy godmother?" asked Connie, suddenly wondering again about the fairy play.

"Oh, you see, my dear, I have many costumes. Not so many here with me, but a few, and that was one of them."

Connie was about to say something else when suddenly Madam Delamar jumped up and hurried into the hall. Her voice, although held down to a whisper, stole back to Connie's unwilling ears.

"But, Aunt Isabel," she was saying, "you must be more careful. Let me see if the door——" The remainder of the sentence was lost, as evidently Madam had turned toward the door about which she had seemed so anxious.

But another voice broke the interval.

"I was most careful," it said. "Chang did not see. I had to go in——"

"Hush," whispered Madam. Then in a tone intended to be heard she said: "Aunt Isabel, I have company. Come and meet my little Cinderella."

Aunt Isabel proved to be a most distinguished looking woman. Somewhat like Madam Delamar but older. She greeted Connie effusively, taking both her hands to grasp one of Connie's, and even after that patting Connie's shoulders somewhat as a school principal might applaud a pupil's success.

"But really I must be going," Connie insisted, recalling her mother's admonition to make her first call fashionably short. "I've stayed such a long time——"

"Must you really go?" questioned Madam. But Connie fancied her manner had changed since she had so abruptly jumped up to attend to the mysterious door at the end of the hall. She remained standing now and did not urge Connie to prolong her visit.

"It has been wonderful," faltered Connie sincerely. "I'm sure I'm ever so thankful——"

"But you must come again very soon," declared Madam. "I shall tell your little prince Michael when to bring you, for we must begin a little study. Just now I'm so dreadfully busy——"

"She scarcely eats or sleeps," interposed the Aunt Isabel, anxiously.

"But my good aunt takes the best care of me,"

Madam complimented. "She brings my food in here often, and she makes me eat it too, don't you, Auntie?"

"One needs to," declared the older woman. "This is worse even than it was in New York."

"But the hardest work will soon be finished and then—I am going to play a little. Cinderella and I will have some wonderful times then. I am pledged to make her an artist, you know, Aunt Isabel," said Madam in a most triumphant voice.

Connie was nearing the door as they talked, and she still noticed Madam Delamar turning her head apprehensively toward the other end of the hall. The interruption had been so sudden and had so changed the smooth, calm manner of Madam into a nervous, furtive mood, that Connie wondered, naturally.

After promising to come again when Michael should bring her, Connie was soon on the porch with that young gentleman trying to persuade Shaggy to "lie down" and give himself and Michael a rest at stone throwing and stone retrieving. He was quite ready to escort her home.

Down over the long, pebbly drive they trudged, Mickey so eager to hear the details of her visit that Connie could scarcely satisfy one question before another was put to her.

"Isn't she great?" he urged, more than once.

"Lovely," Connie would reply.

"And is she going to teach you to be an artist?"

"She couldn't do that, no one could," Connie corrected. "I shall have to be an artist or not, just as I can," she said confusedly. "All any one can do is to teach me about art."

Which was one and the same thing, so far as Michael Collins, Jr., could see.

"What makes you so glum?" the boy asked at last, for Connie's manner was plainly one of silent pondering.

"Glum? Why, I'm delighted——"

"But you act as if you weren't telling me *all* about it," persisted the boy, who could easily interpret his companion's mood.

"I guess I'm thinking of something else, if that's what you mean, Mickey," Connie then admitted. "I wonder why Madam Delamar is so careful to keep a door shut and locked, down in the rear end of the hall?" she then said frankly.

"Oh, that," exclaimed Mickey. "I guess that's what Chang is always talking about. But he's funny. He doesn't understand. Says there's something in that room that would eat me all up

quick. As if he could scare me that way," sneered the boy.

"But Madam didn't want Chang to see in there or go in, I don't know which," continued Connie. "And when the lady she calls Aunt Isabel——"

"Yeah," interrupted Michael, "isn't she nice?"

"Seems to be, but that isn't what I was talking about," Connie retorted. "You asked me what made me so moody——"

"Glum."

"Oh, it's all the same, Mickey. Don't be so tantalizing. But if you don't want to hear, we'll be home in a minute then you can't hear," snapped Connie, for they were almost over the big hill and in actual sight of their homes.

"I didn't mean to be snippy," said Michael humbly. "You were going to tell me about Madam and the glass door."

"Glass door! Who said anything about a glass door?"

"Oh, that's it," explained the boy. "That door is glass and it has a curtain on it. I've seen Chang trying to peek in. He's a funny guy. I guess he thinks there is something spooky in there. He's always pointing out that end of the house and blinking his peanut eyes—funny," concluded Michael chuckling as he finished.

"I wouldn't so much mind what a Jap says, but it was the way Madam acted," Connie said. "She really seemed to get excited all of a sudden. Well, never mind about that. It was wonderful to go and we'll go again, won't we—Prince Michael?"

"Bet your life!" assented he thus royally proclaimed.

CHAPTER XI

NOT ALL SUMMER SUNSHINE

ALTHOUGH the last few minutes of surprised confusion had rather upset Connie's visit to Madam Delamar, she had no intention of allowing it to spoil that afternoon and its hopeful prospects.

She was going to start in and draw, right away. First she must have an easel, and for this she applied to Mickey, as he surely would know where to find smooth, flat sticks, long enough to be nailed together and made stand upright.

The excited girls had heard about her visit to the fairy godmother, as they insisted upon calling Madam Delamar, but Connie did not even hint at the glass door incident. Why should she? After all, it couldn't amount to anything. Just a boy's story about a superstitious Jap, and Connie believed all Japs to be superstitious.

"But every one says that the New York artist is sort of queer," Jeanette insisted. "She never asked a single person to call; not even the doctor's wife."

"She's dreadfully busy," defended Connie. "And besides, she probably doesn't care for callers. I don't see anything queer about that."

"Now you know perfectly well, Connie Loring," put in Margery, "that you heard what Mildred Talbot said. She said her father, Dr. Talbot, had been called there one night to see an old lady——"

"Aunt Isabel, likely," said Connie, familiarly.

"And he said, all the doors on the first floor were locked separately, and he could hardly get his hat and coat when he was coming away, because *they* had been locked up in the reception room by mistake."

"Well, what of it? Madam Delamar has a lot of valuable paintings in all those first floor rooms, and why shouldn't she keep them locked up?" Connie wanted to know.

"There are other noted artists around here and they don't barricade like that," Jeanette put in. "Even the expressmen that moved them out here said there was one box that looked and felt just like a coffin!"

"A coffin!" exclaimed Connie. "I wonder how a coffin feels," she sneered. "However, since none of you girls have to go there, why worry?"

"Now, Connie, don't go getting mad," intervened Jeanette. "If you won't tell us any more we may as well proceed. We came over to read —we've got three new books from the library. We brought you one about art," she said generously.

"Oh, thanks, Jeanette, that's lovely. Of course I wasn't getting mad," Connie condescended, "but you know how it is here in Vinelea. When any one keeps to themselves they're put down as queer," and she took the book Jeanette was offering her, as all three girls started toward the big cherry tree, under which they usually spent the afternoon hours with their books.

But even the best library books failed to hold their attention this afternoon; the news about the artist and the house over the hill was far more interesting. And Connie loved to tell of her adventure. She recalled now details of the furnishings of the studio, for instance, which in her first telling to the girls, she had entirely omitted.

"And one big picture she didn't uncover," Connie told them. "I'm to see that some other day."

"Well, I suppose you are happy now, Connie. You've got part of your wish, anyway," Jeanette reminded the prospective artist. "But you

haven't seen our pictures yet; the ones we took on the auto trip. Wait until I show you."

Then from the depth of the library book Jeanette uncovered the little snapshots.

"Just look at this; of Molly——"

"Oh, isn't that dear!" Connie exclaimed. "Just like a fancy postcard, with Molly on the stone wall. Why, it's pretty enough to be made into a real picture——"

"Keep it, Connie," suggested Margery, "and when you have graduated from Madam Delamar's training school, you can make an oil painting of it."

"It's wonderful!" Connie insisted, ignoring Margery's flippancy. Her critical eyes were fastened upon the pretty picture and she could think of nothing else. "Doesn't it look like—like some peasant——"

"Oh, what's the matter!" exclaimed Jeanette suddenly, jumping to her feet. "What's all the excitement?" She was staring down the street where a crowd was gathering.

"The boys are running——"

But Margery's sentence was left unfinished, for she, with the others, was presently hurrying along to see what could be the matter down on Elm Street.

"He's dead!" they heard some one say. "Poor Mr. Sheehan!"

"Mr. Sheehan! Molly's father!" Connie gasped. "They say he's dead!"

"Fell off a scaffold on the new post office," said a boy, "and he died before they got to the hospital."

And poor, jolly little Molly was left without a father on that lovely summer afternoon. No one could realize it, for Mr. Sheehan had been one of the happiest and most pleasant of men. Always jovial—just as Molly was, and always so well and so happy. What a cruel accident! To fall from a scaffold.

The little group of girls felt the blow keenly, and for some time, even long after the funeral, their happy days seemed suddenly thrust under the black, sinister cloud of real grief. They tried to be cheerful. but things seemed different.

"Poor Molly! Her mother has scarcely any money," Margery was telling the girls, as once more they were gathered to spend a vacation afternoon. "You see, Mrs. Sheehan had been sick so long it took an awful lot of money," Margery went on. "And then, dad says, Mr. Sheehan was paying off on the house——"

"Molly says she can't go back to school," in-

terrupted Geraldine. "Isn't that dreadful! She was so bright, too——"

"Why, Molly couldn't *leave* school," exclaimed Connie in sudden surprise. "She's so young——"

"But she may *have* to," insisted Jeanette. "In fact, she's just the girl who would insist upon earning something. Molly's no slacker."

"Oh, I know that," Connie hurried to say. "But what I meant was, how awful it would be for Molly to have to go to work."

"What could she do?" Margery murmured. "Molly couldn't go at—housework——"

"Perhaps she'd go to work in a store," Jeanette reflected. They were all pondering in sincere sympathy for their little chum, and each seemed to make Molly's trouble her very own.

But Connie was thinking of the picture of the barefoot girl on the stone wall. Why couldn't Molly pose for pictures!

Keeping that idea to herself, for Connie had lately learned to keep many things secret from the girls until she, herself, was assured of their practicability, she looked long and earnestly that night at the little snapshot.

Yes, she would take it in the morning to Madam, and ask her if *she* could do anything to help Molly Sheehan earn money.

Forgetting, in her enthusiasm to help Molly, that Madam had said she, Connie, was to come only when Mickey would be told to bring her, Connie hurried over the hill the next morning. Her precious little picture of the barefoot girl on the stone wall was resting carefully between the pages of her book, alongside of a funny picture of the old gypsy woman, which Jeanette had snapped by mistake.

"Wash day," Connie said half aloud, as she made her way through the thick hedge. Here she was then confronted with the flapping of white linen on the criss-cross lines that decorated the only clear spot in the big back yard. "Hello, Mrs. Manigan," she called, as the blue dressed form of Mrs. Manigan, first-class laundress, stood between Connie and the walk to the side porch. "Lovely day for clothes——"

"Isn't it, dear?" Mrs. Manigan was one of the happiest women in all Vinelea, if she did "go out working" every single day in the week. "How are you, Connie? And all your folks?"

A brief exchange of civilities led to something more interesting.

"And would you believe it," Mrs. Manigan was presently saying, "that heathen cook, Chang, just shuffled off without a day's notice even, and

left poor Madam high and dry without a cook. Of course, I'll help them out, why wouldn't I? And your mother is as busy as ever with her sewing, of course."

Connie managed to answer this question, although she had lost track of a number of others. But what she wanted to know was why Chang had left in such a hurry.

Mrs. Manigan dried her hands on her big apron, and came up to Connie very confidentially.

"Superstitious," she said in an undertone. "They all are—them Chinese. He thought something looked out at him from the back room," and she laughed outright at the idea. "A lot any one would see, trying to get a squint at Chang." Mrs. Manigan found much humor in reflecting upon a Chinese's notion, that any one or anything would want a "squint" at his face, and she allowed no less than four clothespins to slip through her fingers while she enjoyed it.

She was fat and jolly, and liked to laugh, perhaps as well as she liked to wash, and she must have been very fond of her work, or at least have taken great pride in its perfect accomplishment, for no one but "the best people" in Vinelea could ever procure her services.

"Except in case of sickness," she would often

say, she would "do what she could for a body then."

"But Chang seemed to be such a good servant," said Connie. "I can't imagine his leaving."

"Then you ought to see him beat it," declared the laundress, inelegantly. "His feet never left the ground far enough to know they were off of it—just one long—slide——" and another clothespin got away into the comfortable grass plot.

"I'm going in to see Madam. I have something very important to tell her," Connie declared now, moving toward the house as she spoke.

"She's not home!" Mrs. Manigan's voice went so high in making that assertion it indicated much surprise at Connie not knowing this. "She went to New York, straight off to get another servant, of course. But I'll help them out—these ladies are as good as there are in the town, and better maybe," she added, loyally.

"Oh," sighed Connie, "then I'll have to come again. I'm so sorry——"

"She'll be home to-morrow; I heard her say so. And she's that busy—— Isn't this a lovely waist of Mrs. Isabel's? Look at that embroidery."

And when Connie had admired the garment held lovingly in Mrs. Manigan's capable hands, she turned away again, Molly's picture in her book held a little tighter and her heart feeling a little heavier, if it is a girl's heart that feels that way when she's disappointed.

CHAPTER XII

PEDDLING PIPES

So Chang had gone—couldn't stand worrying about the room with the glass doors!

Connie pondered upon this. What really was in there to excite such suspicion, she wondered?

Mickey was not seen around often now, for he had gone to the golf links to caddie, and Connie missed him dreadfully. She wanted to tell him about Chang's abrupt departure; she wanted him to make her an easel, and she wanted to ask him if *he* knew of any way of helping Molly.

Connie's mother had been going to sew at the house of a friend for several days, and this left the girl more than ever to her own devices. She had scarcely any time to talk things over with her mother, for each morning there was a hurried breakfast to be prepared with which Connie assisted, and the evening meal was always entirely prepared by her.

While she was thinking of her little friend's

troubles, next morning after her attempt to see Madam Delamar, Connie was surprised by a visit from Molly herself.

She was in black, although it seemed she should not have put on that badge of grief, but the country people around Vinelea "wore black," so Molly was merely following their example. And she looked prettier in black; the brilliant brown of her half-long hair and the milky whiteness of her skin standing out against the somber background, in clearer contrast.

"Oh, Molly!" began Connie promptly, after pressing her friend's hands in sympathetic greeting, "I was just going over to your house."

"I knew you'd come, Connie, but I couldn't wait," sighed Molly. "Mother's so sick! She has just got to go back to the hospital. I'm determined upon that score. You know, Connie, we haven't anything, scarcely. Mother has been sick so long——"

"I know, Molly. And I have been wondering if we all couldn't do something——"

"The men father worked with will do something if we let them—later," said Molly, in an uncertain tone.

"Of course you *will let* them. I wouldn't be that kind of proud, Molly," urged Connie kindly.

"It's always done among men; Mother said so last night. And every one liked your father."

"That's it. Dad was too good-natured. He has notes among his papers—but there's no use talking about that now," Molly broke off. "I was wondering if you could come over with me this morning. Doctor James is taking mother to the clinic for an examination, and that leaves things to ourselves. I want to go over Dad's things, and see what we might do——"

"Certainly I'll go," Connie assured her friend quickly. "Just wait until I finish the kitchen work. I had to air the bread and cake boxes," and she flew back into the house to take the tin boxes off their posts by the back door.

It took but a few minutes to finish her work, and then they hurried off. How different she found things at Molly's home! But who would dare to criticize, in the face of grief and the discouragement of a sick mother?

The wonder of it was that Molly maintained, or had maintained before her father's death, that cheerful, jolly way which had so endeared her to her companions, Connie realized, as she glanced about the Sheehan home.

"I've been wondering," said Molly finally, "if we could do anything with Dad's pipes. You

know, he had a craze for collecting pipes, and he has four boxes filled with them, all labeled and everything."

"Pipes!" repeated Connie, in surprise.

"Yes. You know men take great pride in them when they *do* like them. Dad had some sent over from England and some from Ireland, and even a few crazy-looking things from Germany," Molly explained. "That's what I wanted to show you while mother was at the clinic."

Together the two girls went into the small dining room, that also had answered Mr. Sheehan's wants as a reading room. From a drawer under the bookcase Molly removed the pipe boxes, and as she handled them, lovingly, tenderly, tears flowed over in her blinking eyes, and Connie pretended to be absorbed in the pipes as they were disclosed. She was trying not to see the grief Molly was fighting against.

"Just imagine!" Connie exclaimed, taking from its velvet case a highly polished French briar. "How carefully he kept them."

"Yes," gulped Molly, "Dad did love his pipes. Just see this one."

"Clay, isn't it?" Connie asked, taking the little box offered her. "That's what they call a 'dudeen' in Ireland, I guess."

"Yes, see here's the slip. Dad had them all marked with slips, you see, so it would be simple for any one to select one. And, of course," the girl in black added, "they are all new. That is, most all——"

"Here's an English briar; isn't it polished beautifully?" Connie commented next, holding up the graceful pipe.

"And this Meerschaum. I often heard Dad boasting of this," Molly went on. "See how like amber it looks now. It was almost white when he got it first. I remember seeing it then."

They both stopped to admire the large pipe of German make, with its mouthpiece of genuine amber.

"That ought to be worth considerable," Connie commented. "Just see what a gorgeously lined case it has."

"But what could *we* do with them?" Molly questioned. She was just then handling a lovely little pipe made of applewood—so its paper slip stated.

"I wonder," deliberated Connie. Then as ever her thoughts flew to Mickey—he always knew what to do. "We—might—ask Mickey?" she ventured.

"Do you think he would know any one who

might buy them?" Molly eagerly asked. "I wouldn't think of giving them to a dealer; they never pay enough. I want, of course, if I can, to sell them privately."

"Pipes," Connie repeated in deep reflection. "It would be hard to know just who might want a pipe, of course. But Mickey——" She stopped; her face lighted up with a sudden inspiration. "I tell you, Molly!" she exclaimed. "Mickey's at the golf course, the very place! They always all smoke pipes there—the golfers, you know. We have got to get after Mickey, right away."

"Oh, the very thing!" Molly also brightened at that idea. "Could you go now? I just feel I'll go crazy if I don't do something, and I can't think of work until I know about Mother's condition," she said sadly.

"Of course I can go now," Connie replied promptly. "I do hope, Molly, you won't have to think of going to work."

"But I do have to think of it," declared Molly, rather decidedly, "and you mustn't imagine I'll mind it, Connie. What *I* must do *I* can do, I hope," she said, with that sort of firmness which had always characterized Molly Sheehan's decisions.

Presently they were gathering the precious boxes into two leather bags, for they had promptly decided upon carrying them all along, so that a possible customer might have a generous selection from all the samples.

Their eagerness to "do something" saved the girls from realizing that they were actually starting out to sell pipes, although in a flash Molly had said whimsically:

"Let's pretend we're pipe peddlers!"

The girls both loaded up with the boxes, each box accompanied by a classification slip, then they finally journeyed forth.

The golf links were over the mountain, down toward Montclair, and along the old Bloomfield road; the girls had an opportunity for the first real chummy chat they had been able to enjoy in a long time.

"You know," Connie introduced, "I wanted to see Madam Delamar this morning, and went over there, but she was gone to New York. Her Chinese or Japanese cook seemed to have left in a hurry."

"They always do, it seems," Molly replied. "And yet Madam is easy to get along with, they say. But the place is spooky, I suppose. It was shut up a long time, you know."

"It's a perfectly lovely place," contradicted Connie, "and I can't imagine any one thinking it's spooky; even if they just meant lonely. I have been there, you know, and I think it a perfectly ideal place," declared Connie a little indignantly.

"Mrs. Manigan goes there too; she just swears by the Delamars," Molly agreeably added. "But then, you know, Mrs. Manigan is so good-natured she wouldn't eat her own hen's eggs; gives them away to sick folks. Really, Connie," the girl interrupted herself to assume a more serious tone, "Mrs. Manigan has been lovely to Mother. Sends her fresh eggs every few days."

"She's a splendid woman," Connie added to the plentiful praise. "Mother says she's an inspiration, going out washing as merrily as if she were going on a picnic. Let's turn in here," Connie then suggested, as they came up to a small vineyard. "We can cut across lots. I hope we can find Mickey. He may be away over there on the hills."

The golf course lay before them, its wonderful broad fairways, bordered by the "rough" to outline the course, the little red and the yellow flags waving merrily over the holes, and the whole area of beautiful country plainly showing how

much better is the sport that brings man nearest to nature's rugged heart.

A group of caddies hung near the first tee. Connie consciously felt the weight of her bag of pipes especially heavy, as she asked them if they knew where Michael Collins was.

"He's caddying for Flanger," replied one boy, having the good manners to touch his cap with a single finger as he spoke to the girls. "Here they come now—just made the round," and as Connie and Molly followed the direction pointed out they saw coming Mickey and his patron, the wealthy and portly Gerard Flanger.

"Let's speak to him while he's with—Mr. Flanger," Connie suggested astutely, when they were far enough away from the caddies to speak without being overheard. "Mr. Flanger might like one."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare——"

"Why not? Come on. Haven't we sold lots of tickets that way? What's the difference?"

And as the happy golfer and his happy little caddie came up to the clubhouse, they were both surprised by Connie's presence and her query.

"Michael," she began very politely, "do you happen to know any one who would be interested in a fine collection of pipes?"

CHAPTER XIII

COÖPERATION

"A COLLECTION of pipes!" It was the golfer, the well-known Gerard Flanger, who repeated Connie's words. "Where in the world did you girls get a collection of pipes?"

A glance from Connie to Molly, in her severe little black dress, seemed to hint at the truth of their predicament. After a moment Connie ventured to speak again.

"We had them, you see," she began. "Molly's father had them." She did not need to say that Molly's father was now gone; that was very plain for any one to guess. "And we felt it would be well to do something with them," Connie continued, her own blue eyes shifting uneasily from Mickey to Mr. Flanger, and then back to Molly as she tried to explain without explaining.

Mr. Flanger, too, quickly recovering from his astonishment at the novel idea of two young girls trying to sell pipes, took Connie's hint, and, tossing his putter to Mickey, stuck his hands in the pockets of his gray sweater, meditatively.

"WHERE IN THE WORLD DID YOU GIRLS GET A COLLECTION OF PIPES?"

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Connie Loring's Ambition.

"Now let me see," he drawled. "Lots of men want new pipes, lots of men around here," he elaborated. "Just what sort are yours?"

"They've got them there, Mr. Flanger," Mickey put in. He was not to be left out of a business proposition of that kind.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Flanger understood. "Suppose we go into the clubhouse and have a look. What did you say your names were, girls?"

Of course they hadn't said what their names were; that was just the nice man's way of making things less formal.

But Mickey quickly supplied the information, and he added to it the news that they were two of the smartest girls in Vinelea. He didn't say it just like that, nor did he break the caddie's form of manners by intruding upon Mr. Flanger's private remarks, but he did help out in his own frank, boyish way, and Mr. Flanger seemed to appreciate his efforts to do so.

"Now, that's first rate," the man declared. "Come along inside, all of you, and let's have a look at the pipes. Michael, you run along to the locker with the clubs and join us later. This way, young ladies," he directed, and as he stepped back to allow the girls to pass in first, he touched Molly's shoulder kindly.

Connie was so glad she had worn her green gingham. It was by the merest chance that she had done so, for that morning was one upon which she had to perform a number of little extra kitchen duties, and she had dressed in a real hurry. But the green gingham, her mother always said, showed off her blonde hair prettily. Connie used to hate her taffy hair, but since others seemed to like it she had learned to make the best of it.

My! How wonderful the clubhouse was inside. The girls had always seen it before from the outside, and as a building it was rather plain and old-fashioned; but within!

Heads of animals, moose, deer and elk stood out under the long beamed ceiling, trophies of hunts in other mountains—noble beasts to fall for the sport of man. On a long, high shelf over a great fireplace, the girls could not but notice the row of silver cups, game trophies, they easily guessed. The rugs were, many of them, bear skins, and the furniture so heavy, so becushioned with leather and felt pillows that, it seemed to the visitors, men had a much more practical sense of personal comfort than women, in spite of woman's boasted home-making talent.

To Connie's artistic eye this view of the big clubhouse was a treat, indeed. She gazed in

silent admiration until Molly nudged her to open the pipe bag. Seated about were a few men, some of them young, but many of them heavy and rather oldish, like Mr. Flanger, who evidently needed golf for exercise. Connie opened her bag on a big chair, and she was then rather conscious of strange eyes glancing toward her, but somehow she never felt embarrassed among men. They were sure not to be critical, she thought, as girls and women are naturally apt to be.

Mr. Flanger was very polite and fatherly, as he helped them get the boxes from the bag, and Molly now seemed quite at her ease.

"Fine! Fine!" the golfer kept exclaiming, in real admiration as he glimpsed into one pipe case after another. "These were splendidly collected. Look at that briar. Hey, look here, Thorton!" he called across the room to a man who was frankly watching the whole proceeding. "Come over here and see what we've got."

This was the beginning of what proved to be a splendid disposal of poor Mr. Sheehan's pipe collection, for there followed a surrounding of all the club men present, their admiration outspoken and sincerely expressed, until Mr. Flanger finally asked the girls to leave the pipes with him.

"I'll be responsible," he said to Connie, who had begun and remained until the end of the session the business manager. "I'll take both your addresses," he arranged, "so that if Michael here should desert me I'll know where to find you."

Molly "found her tongue now" as Mrs. Manigan would have said, and she thanked Mr. Flanger warmly.

"And if you've got anything else——" Mr. Flanger told them, "let's have a look at anything you want to dispose of."

"You said you had some Irish canes," Mickey interrupted. "How about them, Molly?"

"Canes?" asked Mr. Flanger, all interest.

"Yes, we have a few," Molly answered. "They're blackthorns, I think. My father had a friend bring them from Ireland last year."

"If you want to dispose of some blackthorns send them to me, or better still I'll call around for them. At whose house shall I stop?" Mr. Flanger seemed to be going into the souvenir business.

"Better call at our house," Connie answered quickly. "You might be away, Molly, while your mother is sick and going to the hospital."

"Yes," Molly agreed. "They will be at Connie's."

"I'll fetch them over, Mr. Flanger," Mickey offered eagerly. "You're going to play to-morrow morning, aren't you?"

"Yes. That's right, Michael. If the girls will trust you not to play hockey with the canes along the way, you may fetch them."

A few minutes later, the pipe peddlers, with Mickey, were making their way home with empty bags.

"Isn't that splendid!" Connie exclaimed, quickly as she could do so without being overheard by strangers. "Just imagine!"

"You bet!" chirped up Mickey. "And when Mr. Flanger undertakes to do anything he does it up brown. He'll sell those pipes all right. Just watch him!"

"I never would have thought of doing a thing like that," Molly confessed. "Connie, *you* ought to go into business."

"I am. When I can paint pictures I mean to be able to sell them. And, oh, say, Mickey!" she broke off suddenly, "did you know Chang has—escaped? Left Madam Delamar's without an hour's notice?" she continued. "And all because they wouldn't let him go into that room with the glass doors!"

"The big chump! Ought to call him Chump

instead of Chang, though maybe Chang is something worse, for all we know," commented Mickey, in sheer disgust. "When did he go?"

Connie reviewed the story of the Jap's sudden departure, as she had heard it, and she then asked Mickey why that room was considered so mysterious. Did he know?

"No, but I could find out," the boy declared, "only I wouldn't be that kind of a sneak. If the Delamars want to keep the curtains down and the doors locked on a room, I guess they have a right to," he conceded loyally.

"Of course they have," Connie agreed. "And of course you wouldn't spy, Mickey; I know that," she declared.

"But aren't you afraid to go there, Connie?" Molly asked curiously, taking part now in the new subject.

"Afraid! I should say not. It's easy enough to decide that there's nothing wrong there, because the Delamars are not the kind of people who would have anything wrong around them," Connie insisted. "It's just some simple little thing we never would guess at, I suppose," she finished, just as they turned into the street upon which Molly's home was situated.

"That's it," Molly added. "A little thing but

mighty interesting. Little things often are. But you couldn't expect a superstitious Jap to reason that way," she argued. "Mickey, will you come in and get the canes now? You were a king to think of them. Guess I'll have to make you *my* king so I can beat Connie's prince," she went on happily, the prospect of a real return from the pipe sale obviously lightening up her spirits.

It was not so easy, however, to wrap up the six canes (Molly didn't know they had that many) as it had been to put the pipe boxes into the bags. But eventually paper was tied around them and secured at the handles in ingenious ways, for otherwise the paper cases would and did slip off as fast as the trio tried to put them on. Then Michael Collins took them in charge, assuring Molly and Connie that he would get a good price for them—"see if he didn't!"

The morning was now spent, well spent as will be seen, and the girls were jubilant over the prospects of obtaining something really worth while from Molly's father's humble effects.

"You may get quite a lot," Connie speculated, not venturing to guess how much. "Won't it be splendid if you can stay at school, Molly?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that, Connie," Molly answered cheerfully enough, "for Mother is sure

to need lots of things, and you know I'm just going to help get them for her," promised brave little Molly.

"Of course," assented Connie, admiring Molly's determination. "I wish I could help you," she added wistfully.

"You have. Do you think I could ever have gone up to that clubhouse without you?"

"Oh, that; that was simple. We knew we'd find Mickey there. Isn't Mickey a little *wonder?*"

"Yes," drawled Molly, not attempting to offend Connie with a personal compliment to go with those being piled upon Mickey. "Well, Connie," she did say, however, "I guess we can call it a morning's work. Mother will be back soon, I hope, and I hope, also, that she will have some good news."

"I hope so too," said Connie, after asking her friend to go to lunch with her, but knowing well she would not consent to do so.

While they talked the doctor's car drove up and Molly hurried out to meet her mother, whose pale face looked almost ghostly under the dismal black veil that framed it.

Connie sighed instinctively, as she raced away over the lots to her own cheerful little home.

CHAPTER XIV

AGAIN URANIA

It was surprising how interesting Molly's affairs had become. Connie didn't even care for her drawing these days, for the reports that Mickey kept bringing back and forth from the club, about the pipe sale and the Smoker for A Worthy Cause, which was planned to go with it, became so absorbing that nothing else seemed to matter.

"Swellest thing!" he exclaimed, in giving Connie his daily bulletin, "the Smoker. Mr. Flanger has everybody selling tickets. Bet they'll make a heap of money."

"Won't that be wonderful, Mickey!" and Connie almost danced out there in the sunlight where she had been gathering fresh petunias for the dining room. "But listen, Mickey," she cautioned, "we must not even tell the girls about it. You see, it wouldn't be quite, quite nice to have Molly taking charity money——"

"It isn't charity money!" snapped Mickey.

"Those men buy tickets for a smoker, and you can just bet they get their money's worth," he declared, stronger than emphatically.

"Of course that's the right way to look at it," agreed Connie gladly. "But even so, don't let's tell any one about it; I mean, what the worthy cause is for."

"We're not even supposed to know," the boy answered quite unreasonably, instead of agreeing with Connie at once. "I know, and *you* know, but other folks aren't supposed to," he ended rather boastfully.

"Of course," said Connie again, putting her petunias in a bunch, the darkest in the center and the light ones bordering the edge. "And I've got another scheme too, Mickey," she confided. "If I ever can get a chance to see Madam Delamar."

"Why don't you go over this afternoon? She's home and she asked me about you last night when I brought the papers," Mickey informed Connie.

"This afternoon?"

"Sure. Best time to go. Want me to go with you?"

"Oh, no, thanks, Mickey. I can go alone. You might miss a chance to caddy——"

"But if you didn't want to go alone——"

"Oh, I don't mind since the Jap went away," Connie added, laughing at the idea. "Wasn't he a queer duck?"

"Sort of, but good-natured." Mickey would find something "good" about any one who had ever treated him kindly, and Connie liked him better for that, even if he was now standing up for the Jap.

"And he went off because he was frightened about the room they keep closed up," she kept on, hoping her friend would be able to add some explanation. "Just imagine! As if nice people like the Delamars would have anything in there—not all right."

"Yeah," drawled Mickey. "As if they would. That's right; they wouldn't."

"But Chang lived in the house and ought to know that," pressed Connie. Mickey was hard to draw out.

"If he knew anything, but he didn't," declared Mickey, crisply.

"You think it's all right for me to go there alone, don't you, Mickey? There couldn't be a —a lunatic in that room, could there?" Connie laughed as she asked.

"Naw! 'Course not!" scoffed the boy. "There isn't any one, lunatic nor no one else in

there," he insisted, mixing his negatives somewhat but in no way mixing his meaning. "It's just something—something secret, that's all," he finished, positively. "You're not afraid of it, are you?"

"Not a bit," declared Connie stoutly, "and I'll go over this very afternoon. I've been really busy with Molly's affairs. How is her mother? Have you seen Molly to-day?"

"Nope; she isn't home. I guess Mrs. Sheehan's pretty bad. Mother said so. Wouldn't it be terrible if she should die and leave Molly all alone?"

'Michael!" This thought had not before come to Connie and as the boy suggested such a dreadful possibility for poor Molly, it made Connie gasp. "Do you think—does your mother think she's really in danger?"

"Pretty bad," he said, shaking his head sadly. "But then, of course, she may get to be all right. They can do wonders at the hospital."

Connie found it difficult to summon her smiles after that, for the suddenness of Mickey's fears, expressed as he had expressed them, left her shocked, frightened for Molly. She must surely go now to see Madam Delamar without delay, for not even Mr. Flanger's kind agency would

do as much for Molly as some employment might do, wisely Connie reasoned.

Wild cherries were beginning to ripen early, and as she went over the hill a few hours later, Connie was tempted to try a few of the berries that grew abundantly on low trees between her own yard and the large grounds surrounding the big house over the hill.

"Um-m!" Connie mummed. "They're good. I wonder if Madam would like some? She likes berries, Mickey said so."

Promptly deciding to bring some along, she began breaking off the branches, as this was the best way to carry cherries. The trees were quite near the little summer house, and as she tarried there the memory of her fairy night experience flashed before her mind pleasantly.

Suddenly she felt conscious that some one was watching her. Then she heard bushes whisp as if in contact with some hidden force; she even heard a footfall on the dried underbrush.

"It is you again?" came a sharp voice. "The little girl who ran away from the fortune teller!"

The gypsy!

Connie was too frightened to move or speak, for the woman's eyes seemed to glare spitefully at her, as if resenting Connie's running away

that day when Molly was posing for her picture.

"Oh, hello!" Connie managed to say. "I didn't see you coming."

"So you couldn't run." How the old woman hissed the words. If Connie could only run now.

"Won't you have some cherries? They're ripe so early," Connie said somehow. She wanted to appear friendly, and offered the cherries in pretext.

"Cherries—ripe?" and the woman put out her hands for Connie's best branch. "Where you goin'?" she demanded, sharply.

"I live down here," replied Connie, quickly deciding that she would not mention Madam Delamar.

"You got some money for fortune?"

"Not—here—with me," murmured the frightened Connie. If only she could give her something! These creatures, she knew, were almost childish in some ways. But Connie didn't even have on her beads or she would have given them quickly enough.

She was holding tight to the book in her hand, with Molly's picture between the pages, when she suddenly remembered! With Molly's picture was another. The girls had had it developed for fun. And it was a picture of this gypsy!

"Oh, I have something for you!" Connie gleefully exclaimed. "Wait until I get it."

As she quickly looked through the book, almost too nervous to find the picture, the old woman came up so close to her that Connie feared she might know how dreadfully nervous she was, for her fingers were trembling as she turned the pages.

"Oh, here it is!" Connie said, as she did actually find the print. "See!"

She held up to the woman Jeanette's snapshot, and as the gypsy saw it her dark eyes danced.

"Me! It is of me! Urania's picture!" and she grabbed it so eagerly Connie could not but smile.

"Yes, you may have it. Isn't it good?" Connie went on, marking time and hoping some one would come over the lane soon, or that she could get away without actually running away this time.

"Good! Yes, it is good. You give it to me? You nice girl. I tell fortune——"

"Oh, you can have it," Connie was only too glad to say, for the old woman was still gazing spellbound at the humble little print. "And I'm sorry I haven't time for a fortune. Good-by, Urania——"

"You good girl. I do something for you some day," declared the gypsy woman. "Maybe I

bring you good luck——" How she fondled that picture!

"Thanks; that will be lovely," answered Connie, who secretly hoped the creature would not "wish any of her luck, good or bad," upon her. She didn't like gypsies, she didn't believe in fortunes or luck, and she just wanted to race over that hill down to her own humble, but safer quarters. There the lots were open, the roads clear enough to see a distance along them and there were always people about.

Next time she went over the hill she would take company along. Maybe Molly, if Mickey was too busy to go. Thus she quickly reasoned.

"Good-by!" she called gayly again to the old woman in the gypsy costume.

"Like a bird—you fly!" was all that Connie could hear. But she felt her heart pounding as if she had just locked it up in a box too tight, too small and too solidly built for it.

Hearts are dreadfully unreasonable when girls get frightened. They seem to hold them back instead of helping them on, as any sensible heart might be expected to do.

But Connie was past the summer house at last, over the broken rustic fence, down through the blackberry patch and home!

CHAPTER XV

ALL ABOUT A PRESENT

"TALK about luck, good or bad," laughed Connie to herself, while she sat breathless on her own small steps that led to the kitchen door, "if Molly's picture doesn't soon get to Madam Delamar, I'll have to mail it, or send it by express. It seems impossible for me to take it there."

The gypsy's sudden appearance was upsetting. Connie disliked gypsies; they had been camping each summer for a long time in the hills between the mountains. No one in Vinelea professed any liking for them, and the town council was rather severe in its orders for them to keep out of the borough limits.

Not every crime ascribed to them was really theirs, however, for a set of linen towels "taken from a clothes line on Hilltop Street" was afterwards found in the bushes, blown there by the wind.

"But gypsies are not like other people," Connie

was thinking, remembering the beady black eyes of the old woman who called herself after the planet Urania.

"I must get at my work; my paints will get hard if I don't," Connie cautioned herself again, jumping up and making straight for the kitchen, where she was to finish painting a big green and red parrot on the hot water boiler.

Mrs. Loring believed in a bright, but not a white, kitchen, so the pleasant little room, that lapped over on the lawn at the side and back of the cottage, had been painted a brilliant yellow. It was so brilliant that it caught every ray of light from the sky, thrown in generous beams through the windows, and the yellow walls tossed these rays of light about the room in a never-failing glow. Yellow is such a joyous color, and in a kitchen it does seem to take the hardship out of the commonplace duties sure to be centered there.

It was upon these glowing walls that Connie had contracted with her mother to put decorations. Over one door there were three lovely blue birds, copied from a book Connie had had since babyhood; over the sink, in a panel quite mural, were three familiar figures, in their bright costumes and wooden shoes, that had been copied

from the wrappers of a famous cleansing powder. Another really pretty bit was a vine of morning glories—the original of these was on a very, very old vase—and toward the morning glories was seen flying a little humming bird.

Not all of these were perfectly done, to be sure, for Connie was not yet expert, but they were "good," so good that Mickey never wanted to leave the kitchen when he got in there. If Connie had followed his line of suggestions there wouldn't be any yellow wall left at all. It would be covered with pictures.

But she had had a lot of trouble with the hot water boiler, for that "peeled." She had put several drawings of charcoal in outline upon it, only to see them go into vague smudges over night; but this time she had made sure. She was putting her colors on a background of good quality, silver radiator finish, and that couldn't come off from the heat of the water within the boiler.

Her paints were just where she had left them; spread upon the kitchen table on the newspapers which her mother insisted should always be put under the paints. Connie was covered with the precious smock, originally one color, but now decorated like a sample chart of various colors.

It was really remarkable the way her paint brushes just seemed to love to get at that smock —and leave daubs of color down the front like crooked buttons and in fact all over the garment, like a regular clown's costume.

The parrot on the boiler was now getting his long tail brushed on. His wings were red with dashes of yellow up near "the roots," and his tail was just as easy to do, so that now with a few capable strokes, the young artist had achieved the long graceful tail, and it looked pretty well, she thought.

But the beak! That curved bit of horn bone that came out of polly's nose and curved down under her double chin! This was harder to paint than even the claws that wrapped themselves around the straight, brown stick, upon which the bird was so comfortably perched.

Standing off to view her attempts at the beak, and the little slit of an eye, she had put in and rubbed out several times, Connie was startled by a sharp knocking at the kitchen door.

She didn't call "come in." Being all alone, she went to the side door and looked around to the back. A girl was standing there, and she looked like a gypsy!

"Hello!" called out Connie, glad to see that the knocker was a girl and not a man.

"Hello!" came back the reply, as a girl, dark-complexioned as the outdoors can make one's skin, turned to answer Connie. There was no doubt about it, this girl was a gypsy.

She came up to the side porch from which Connie was speaking, and as she sauntered along Connie noticed she was rather pretty, in that picturesque way that very dark persons are usually pretty. She was wearing a sort of blue chiffon dress all beaded! It was not beaded as gypsies or Indians do the work, for it was a "store dress" originally labeled, probably, "fashionable dinner gown of blue crepe with bugle bead embroidery."

"Is your name Connie Loring?" the girl asked, in the most matter-of-fact way; quite as if it were her business to know and Connie's to inform her.

"Yes," said Connie, hesitantly. She didn't like the imperative tone of the stranger. It didn't seem polite.

"Well, my grandmother, Urania, sent me to tell you to come to our camp. She's got a present for you," the girl said in that same hard voice,

but this time just the flicker of a smile broke over her olive-skinned face.

"A present?" repeated Connie in surprise.

"Yes. But I can't tell you what it is. She wants it should be a surprise," the girl said quaintly. "She likes you." This last remark was evidently a matter of surprise to the girl herself, as if her grandmother, Urania, did not like many persons.

"I'm glad," murmured Connie, feeling she had to say something agreeable. "Is your grandmother——"

"She's the gypsy," interrupted the girl blandly. "She tells fortunes swell."

"And she wants me to go—to your camp?"

"Yes. She wants to give you the present. She couldn't send it; it's something—something she couldn't send. When'll you come?"

"I can't say just now," replied Connie, confused and not knowing just what to say. "But I'll come, soon as I can. Where is your camp?"

"Over second mountain in the poplar patch," replied the girl. "You can't see the wagon on the road, but just walk in toward the pond, and we're on the other side."

"All right," replied Connie, wondering how she would ever manage to go to that lonely gypsy

camp. "I'll come just as soon as I can," she assured the strange girl.

"Have to be to-morrow because we're leaving. We're packing up now," said the girl. "My name's Lorella. You can call out my name when you come. I'll be there."

"All right," again Connie answered, feeling very stupid not to be able to say something else. "And I'll call for you, Lorella," she managed to say, too surprised at the message to feel otherwise than astonished.

"Good-by. Don't forget. Urania likes you and she wants to give *it* to you. She likes her picture. It's good," and Lorella turned toward the gate without betraying any more girlishness than if she were some sort of human machine that had never smiled nor known anything but hard serious work.

"Good-by—Lorella," Connie said pleasantly. "And thank you for coming."

"What?"

"Thank you for bringing your grandmother's message," Connie repeated, making her meaning clearer.

"Oh, that's nothing. I had to. We all have had to do what granny says," declared Lorella simply, as she passed through the gate, her blue

crêpe beaded dress swishing absurdly as she went.

"Just imagine!"

Connie uttered her favorite exclamation aloud, although there was no one to hear it. Then she turned again into the kitchen, gave a hopeless glance at her unfinished parrot, hurried her paints into the cupboard, yanked off her smock and, locking all doors most carefully first, then made a run for Michael Collins' home, a half block down the street.

And he was home, for a wonder, although it was not quite dinner time for him or lunch time for Connie. Her own mother would be home for lunch and Connie had something to do before the meal could be called ready, she realized also.

She told the boy briefly of Lorella's visit.

"The gypsy camp! Sure we'll go," declared Mickey, fairly sparkling at the possible fun in store. "We'll all go. A couple couldn't go alone there. The gypsies are pretty tricky folks, you know," the little business man declared, tossing his head from side to side to make his remarks more emphatic.

"I know," said Connie, "and that's why I'm wondering about going. Whatever could that old woman want to send me?"

"Oh, maybe a basket, or a pair of beads or some tin earrings——"

"But she said it was something she couldn't send. That is why I'm supposed to have to go after it," reasoned Connie.

"If she couldn't send it by this here girl Loretta——"

"Lorella," corrected Connie.

"All right, not much difference, is there? But I was saying, if she couldn't send it how are *you* going to bring it?"

"Maybe it's something—very personal."

"How do you mean, personal?"

"Why, something just to be handled by the one who owns it," Connie said, but he didn't seem to know what she meant by saying it.

"What kind of a thing could that be?" queried the puzzled boy. "Something just to be handled by the one who owns it," he repeated, trying to make sense out of the words.

"Oh, there are things like that," declared Connie stubbornly. "Anyhow, I'm not sure Mother will let me go. She never *has* let me go near a gypsy camp."

"Well, we'll all go over and ask together," suggested the little diplomat. "That's the best

way. And when she sees we are all really going, I don't believe she'll be afraid to let you come along."

"Oh, she's not *afraid*——" But the twelve o'clock bell was ringing and Connie had to cut short further discussion. That lunch was still to be prepared for her mother, who was due home not later than twenty minutes past twelve.

CHAPTER XVI

PUZZLES AND PROBLEMS

THE very idea of a present from the gypsy was a big surprise to Connie.

"No matter what it turns out to be," she was calling back to Mickey, as she hurried off to make the cheese toast for her mother's lunch, "it is sure to be something—queer."

"You bet," agreed the boy, " 'cause they're so queer themselves. But remember not to mention it to your mother," he cautioned. "You might spoil it. We'll all parade around to-night and then she'll see."

"All right," consented Connie, "and if you see any of the girls tell them to come around. I've got to finish painting something this afternoon" (she meant the parrot on the boiler), "so I won't be out."

"The smoker is to-night, you know," Mickey shouted, and Connie could only wave her hand in acknowledging that she knew. Yes, the smoker, at which the precious pipes were to be

disposed of, was to be held at the Fairway Golf Club that very evening.

"And Molly will be sure to get a lot of money from it," Connie was assuring herself, between placing slices of cheese on the bread to be toasted, and trying to arrange two places at the table, so that her mother would not be kept waiting for her lunch.

"I do wish Mother didn't have to go to people's houses to work," grumbled Connie to herself. "Of course they are all old friends of hers —but then, I wish she could stay home," she reflected.

Connie had always accepted her mother's management in every particular as being the best. She never questioned or even thought much about things her mother planned and attended to, because her mother was so capable; one of those women so happy in their lives that no one would think of attempting to make them happier. But lately Connie was missing her comradeship. Mrs. Loring had so little time for doing things with her daughter, that the daughter, now growing to the age that requires companionship, was beginning to question their circumstances.

"Molly just about bosses her mother," Connie went on rebelliously, and with a certain admira-

tion for the girl who could "boss her mother," yet she, Connie, had never even offered to help earn money!

"Perhaps I shouldn't think of painting until —until I can earn money," she thought gloomily, for her painting meant the most precious of any pleasure she had yet enjoyed. "Maybe I ought to do something in vacation," she persisted. "Mother would have it easier, I'm sure, even if I could help a little, with money for shoes or something like that."

She continued to worry and when lunch was being partaken of, Mrs. Loring was rather surprised at her daughter serving that sort of argument along with the toast.

"Why, my dear," she exclaimed, "aren't you satisfied? Don't you have as many pretty things as the other girls?"

"Oh, yes, Mother, of course I do. My clothes are always prettiest because you are such a genius at making pretty things," Connie assured the surprised lady. "But I got to thinking of how much Molly is going to do——"

"Didn't you help some, in Molly's case?" asked the mother slyly. "It seems to me, the affair at the club all came about through your conniving. And you needn't worry, girlie," Mrs. Loring en-

couraged, "the chief thing is to have a disposition to help. *You* have that. The next thing is to have sense enough to find a way, and I'm sure you could do that. So don't let us bother any more about what *might* happen. The things that *are* happening keep us all pretty busy, don't they?"

"But *I'm* not doing anything——"

"Oh, indeed you are, dear. You are doing all that is required of you, and that's always a more heroic task than the doing of bigger and more showy things. I must run along now. You should see the darling dress I'm making for Elinor Baily. It's just a dream——"

"I'm sure it must be lovely, Mother, you do make such pretty things," Connie murmured very evenly. "But, you know, I like rather simple dresses. I never could see beauty in frills and ruffles. Good-by, Moms, I'll do a lot of painting this afternoon, if no one interrupts me. Then I'll get the kitchen straightened out at last," she sighed, thus tactfully apologizing for the long delays.

"And it is going to be worth waiting for," Mrs. Loring declared. "You aren't slow, Connie, it is simply that you have so many little things to distract you. But don't worry about that

either, just now, for it is lots better to play cut of doors during vacation than even to paint kitchen pictures," and the mother, who was always and ever an inspiration to the loving daughter, was off again to make her nimble fingers fly, in the interest of pretty dresses and—of money.

The afternoon went by quickly, but Connie had finished her parrot, beak, claws, wings and tail, all, so that she was quite satisfied with the accomplishment. It was just before dinner time, for Connie, but supper time for Mickey, that the boy came parading along as he promised he would, a half dozen others, including Jeanette, Margery and Molly, all delegated to obtain from Mrs. Loring her permission for Connie to visit the gypsy camp.

"You see, Mrs. Loring," said Mickey as spokesman, "we'll all just run over there from the golf links. I have to caddy in the morning, but I'll be finished by ten——"

"But those horrid gypsies," protested Mrs. Loring, "are always such a dirty tribe. What could *they* have to give any one?"

"That's the fun of it," spoke up Molly. "What could they have? Maybe it's an enchanted tambourine, or a magic kettle."

Her guess brought forth a hearty laugh from

every one, but Jeanette, being wise as usual, sided with Mrs. Loring and scoffed at the idea of going to the camp.

"They might just rob us, or something like that——"

"Rob us!" shouted Connie. "Why, we haven't even hair ribbons now, and with all of us and Mickey's three caddies along, I guess the gypsies would behave themselves. At any rate, they're not so crazy. That girl who called here was so smart she just didn't waste a word. Wish I could talk like her."

"Maybe you could if you dyed your hair," whispered Dick Lawrence, mischievously.

But Mrs. Loring couldn't see the wisdom of the youngsters, not even a whole party of them, going into that camp, so it was finally settled that the girls should wait on the road by the bridge, while the boys went directly into the camp and brought back the present.

"They can surely bring out to you whatever the foolish old woman has for you," Connie's mother declared, "and it seems to me a crowd of caddies——"

"Sure, all right, that's all right," agreed Mickey, as usual speaking for the whole delegation. "I've got to hurry. Something on at the

club to-night and I'm going over." (It was the pipe smoker, but no one knew about it except Connie and himself.) "You girls fix up the time and place and all that," he added in a way so business-like that even Connie admired his tact and compared it secretly but favorably with that of the gypsy girl, Lorella.

When he and Dick were gone, and the last squeaks of their whistling duet sounded down the street, the girls, left to themselves, began anew their speculations as to the nature of the gypsy's present.

"It really should be yours, Jeanette," Connie suggested. "It was your camera, and it was you who took the old lady's picture, you know."

"But it was you who gave it to her; I should never have dreamed of doing a thing like that," frankly admitted Jeanette, modestly.

"Isn't it too wonderful!" cried out Margery, as usual crying out in gleeful expectation of something wonderful. "I can't imagine——"

"Nothing surprising about that," Molly said a little sarcastically. "We aren't, any of us, claiming a first-class guess. But let's go along. It's about dinner—supper—time and mother hates to be alone when people pass by from work."

Molly meant that her mother could not bear to be alone and see other men coming home from their work, now that her husband, Molly's father, was gone. The girls understood all this, and for a few moments made no remark.

Then, having completed their plans for the morning's "raid on the gypsy camp" as Connie expressed it, they parted, satisfied that something surprising, at least, was certainly in store for them when they would wait at the bridge while Mickey and his friends descended upon the camp.

"Just think, Mother," said Connie, now assisting with arranging their little dinner table in that end of the dining room where the bay window opened upon the garden, "to-night is the night for the club smoker. Molly doesn't know the details, Mickey just told her that Mr. Flanger was going to see about things to-night. But *I* know it will surely be great."

"I'm sure it will," Mrs. Loring repeated, "for what those men undertake they are sure to carry through successfully. They are, I suppose, prominent business men, and they ought to know how to conduct a business affair of that kind. They make it an evening of pleasure, of course, but there is, you see, dear, a business affair behind it all."

"Just imagine!" exclaimed Connie. "Having poor Mr. Sheehan's pipes go like that!"

"Rather appropriate, it seems to me," said her mother, "for the men there will appreciate them. Besides, as you say, Mr. Flanger is kind and considerate. And Mr. Flanger's name is one of those very well known in the country's affairs. He's a very prominent American."

"He could, if he wanted to," reasoned Connie, "just take the pipes himself and give us a big check. I suppose he would never miss it, would he?"

"Maybe not, but that wouldn't be what is called good business. Just giving money away is scarcely ever the best thing to do," the mother patiently explained. "Let me give you some more salad, dear," she suddenly broke off. "You must eat lots of green stuff in summer, you know, to keep up with the other things that grow so beautifully."

Connie held up her plate for more of the tender lettuce leaves that she had gathered from their own little garden. Then she continued her questions anent the pipe sale.

"But why, Mother," she puzzled, "isn't it good or best just to give money to such a worthy cause?"

"There are a number of reasons," replied the mother. "Just giving money is so often the way of getting rid of a duty, you see. But *earning* money for a cause, by putting energy and attentive thought to it, often makes the cause do as much for the workers as for the one who is to be benefited."

"You mean," reasoned the girl who had suddenly become very interested in substitutes for charity, "that every man who goes to the smoker or who gets a pipe will be—will understand that he should help in such affairs?"

"Exactly. One little pipe may preach a better sermon on a man's duty to his fellow man than could the giving away of a lot of money."

"Oh, yes. Every one can't give money so that wouldn't be a practical lesson. But a pipe! And, Mother, they were the loveliest pipes!"

"I am sure they were," replied the woman, happy to know that her daughter was now learning to put the biggest things first.

CHAPTER XVII

FAITHFUL FRIENDS

CAN a surprise be expected?

It was a surprise and yet it had been expected by Connie—that is, she expected the surprise but not such a big one.

Early next morning—the morning after the smoker and the day of the proposed visit to the gypsy camp—a fashionable little roadster was drawn up in front of Connie's door. As she saw it she breathed a sigh of real joy, because her mother was at home that day. It seemed so much nicer.

"Oh, it's Mr. Flanger! Mother, will you please go——"

"Yes, dear. There, pick up my apron," as Mrs. Loring tossed the small article in the general direction of the kitchen door. She, herself, was going toward the hall door.

The bell rang as she went, and a smiling gentleman confronted her as she opened the door. He was in his golf togs, and as he boyishly snatched off his cap his heavy hair, a blend of

brown and gray, fell softly on his broad forehead.

"Mrs. Loring, I believe?" he began.

"Yes. I'm Connie's mother," was the simple form of introduction offered by Mrs. Loring.

"And Connie is—quite a girl," spoke up the caller genially. "I'm Mr. Flanger. I suppose she has been telling you about me? I'm sort of agent for pipes, and little girls who want to sell them," he went on in a very pleasant way, his eyes twinkling as his words clinked.

Connie was listening; that is, she couldn't very well help hearing, and it was she who thought of his words as clinking, like something merry sounding with a light, musical touch.

"I'll call Connie; come in, Mr. Flanger," invited Mrs. Loring, in her rather dignified way. Connie was so glad the dusting had been done; she had managed it on the afternoon before, while she rested from her parrot painting, and wanted to think of things. Just dusting didn't interfere either with resting or thinking, according to Connie. And just a little ripple of pride suffused her as she heard her mother invite the stranger in.

"Mother is so—so splendid," she was thinking, "and so sort of cultured in her easy dignified

way." No thought now of the hated sewing which had been the means of keeping up that same "dignified, cultured way." A fine needlewoman is not one whose occupation is to be despised; it always does seem like a woman's natural and choicest calling—to do fine things with a fine needle!

Voices from the living room floated out, and her own name called presently, summoned the waiting girl.

Smiles! Mr. Flanger's face was buried beneath them.

"Well, my girl," he began, "I hope you'll be satisfied with our sale of the pipes." He was opening his leather wallet. "Here's the returns. All in. We made the fellows all pay up last night so that the books could be closed."

He was offering Connie a blue slip of paper; a check. She was so eager to find out how much money the check represented that she could hardly put her hand out to take it.

Her mother was watching intently. Mr. Flanger was smiling—aloud. That is, little chuckles escaped on the waves of his smiles, he did seem so happy.

Connie's eyes were now on the slip. She could

see the figures in the corner! And read the amount as it was written in.

"One hundred and fifty dollars!" she exclaimed. "Oh! Mother!" and the surprising girl actually turned baby enough to rush into her mother's arms and almost sob out her happiness.

Or was it embarrassment? No matter, she did it anyway, and her mother just patted her shoulder a minute, while Mr. Flanger stood there watching them both.

Presently the girl recovered her composure and turned an embarrassed face toward the caller.

"Thank you, so much," she faltered. "You see, I was so surprised——"

"Nice, isn't it?" the gentleman remarked, now sitting down in the chair which Mrs. Loring offered him. "We were all tickled to death. You never saw a crowd of men enjoy themselves more—— Why, Mrs. Loring," he suddenly changed in his voice and manner, "do you know there were some rare pipes among those? Yes, indeed," without waiting for her reply which, however, she was expressing in her interested manner. "Yes, we had one or two that brought fancy prices. And the canes!" He slapped his knee joyfully as he spoke of the canes. "We have

two members who have lately visited their homes in Ireland and they almost fought over those canes. They *were* beauties!"

"This money will help our friends very greatly, Mr. Flanger," said Mrs. Loring, as Connie still seemed too overwhelmed to say anything. "They are worthy, but when death, sudden death, follows other misfortunes, especially when the one wage-earner is taken, it leaves things very much upset for the helpless ones," she explained, sympathetically.

It was at this point that Mr. Flanger enquired further into the affairs of Molly's home. Her mother's illness was, of course, the most serious of the problems discussed, and then the matter of Molly's education was brought up.

"A little girl like that simply must not leave school," Mr. Flanger insisted. "We'll have to see about that. I can understand that they would object to charity as it is sometimes offered but—— Well, just keep me posted," he said to Mrs. Loring. "We often find ways out of difficulties when a couple of heads go at them." No wonder her mother had thought him an expert business man, Connie pondered.

"You are so kind," she managed to say to him, her face still burning and her eyes shifting

around against her will. She never had felt so foolish before, it seemed to her.

"Now, I'm not going to say just what I think," spoke up the caller, as he arose from his chair, "but I will say this much: little Molly Sheehan has a good friend in—little Connie Loring."

"And they both have a good friend in——"

"Tut-tut!" he interrupted Connie's mother, who was just about to express a compliment to him. "We might as well play with pipes and canes as with golf balls. Have Michael bring you both up to the club some day," he said next. "You'll find things that will interest you, Mrs. Loring, and we have ladies' day every so often. Play cards, you know, and all that. But if you didn't care for bridge, come up and look around. We have some great trophies; you might like to see them."

All of this was merely showing his politeness, Connie understood, but it was pleasant to hear some one invite her mother to a real place; although she would not be likely to go to the clubhouse. Again that thought of her mother's slavery to her work hurt the girl who was listening. Why couldn't her mother be as free to enjoy herself as those others who seemed to do nothing else?

"Wait till I can paint pictures and sell them," she promised just as Mr. Flanger paused before one of her paintings—the old mill picture she had put up unframed on the window casing.

"I hear the girl is interested in art," he said, inspecting the little picture critically. "That ought to be a tie between us; painting has always been a hobby of my own!"

"Oh, that picture isn't really any good at all," declared Connie, instantly forgetting her embarrassment. When pictures were mentioned Connie never thought of herself—it was always just pictures then.

"Not bad at all," Mr. Flanger observed. "That sky is good. And it's a queer thing how few painters can make a live sky. Most of them look as if their paint-pots spilled on them," he declared, laughingly.

"Connie rather likes skies," said her mother. "We always joked her about making clouds. She used to try to outline them in her mud pies——"

"Mother!" protested Connie, but they all laughed at mention of the mud-pie skies, and Mr. Flanger said something about bad storms following clouds of that sort.

Connie was holding her blue check all this time,

secretly wondering what Molly would say, and also wondering what would be the best way to give it to the Sheehans. It was sure to be a great surprise to them, and a very welcome one, for the last report, privately obtained by Mrs. Loring from Mrs. Sheehan's doctor, was by no means encouraging.

With further thanks to Mr. Flanger and some extra compliments for Connie and Molly from him, he was presently in his little roadster again, while the two Lorings indulged in such a joyful little exhilaration that even the dignified one, Mrs. Loring, danced gayly about the hall.

"Oh, Mumsey! Isn't it too glory-ocious!" Connie exclaimed, among the other noises she was making. "Can you believe it! Just imagine! One hundred and fifty dollars!"

The mother stood still long enough to grab Connie and give her a bearish hug.

"It is simply great!" she in turn exclaimed. "And, my dear," she assumed quite a different tone now, "I'm afraid our friends are going to need much more than money——"

"Isn't Molly's mother going to get better?" demanded Connie, suspecting something tragic from her mother's words.

"There is some hope, but not a great deal,"

Mrs. Loring replied. "But, at any rate, that money is going to do a lot for them both."

"Oh, I do hope so," sighed Connie, all the smiles gone now as she suddenly feared for Molly. "How dreadful if her mother has to die and leave her all alone!"

"Now, dear," urged the mother, trying to brighten things up again, "you haven't much time to spare. What do you want to do about the check?"

"I was wondering, Mother, if *you* would give it to Mrs. Sheehan. You can explain things so well and you would make them understand that it isn't, any of it—charity."

"But you girls would miss her surprise," Mrs. Loring pointed out, considerately.

"That wouldn't be anything," said Connie bravely. "I know Molly only cares about her mother, she wouldn't think anything of missing the surprise of giving her the money."

"Certainly, dear, I'll be glad to take it over," Mrs. Loring promptly offered. "In fact, I'd think it real pleasure myself to see Mrs. Sheehan's joy. And I guess it might be best for me to do so as Mrs. Sheehan is too ill to have any—any excitement at present."

"That's the way I feel about it, Moms," agreed

Connie. "And, you know, Molly and I are kids enough to go crazy just talking about the check."

"Yes, you both have the gift of imagination," her mother said, smiling again. "And I can't get over the result of your pipe sale, myself. It is simply wonderful," she declared repeatedly.

"Oh, that's all Mr. Flanger's generosity——"

"But he had a good thing to work on, you see—— There come your friends. Now for your gypsy present," Mrs. Loring interrupted, for Margery, the advance guard of the girls who were going to the camp, was running on ahead, already shouting for Connie to hurry up.

They would meet the caddies at the bridge, according to the much discussed and finally decided upon, previous arrangements.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GYPSY'S GIFT

THEY were all excited, the boys as well as the girls, for going into the gypsy camp on business was quite an adventure. All of them meeting at the bridge occasioned at once a babel of orders.

"Now, boys," Jeanette would say, "be sure to stick together——"

"Think they'll try to kidnap us?" scoffed Dick Lawrence, importantly.

"Now don't try to be funny," retorted little Margery. She evidently hated to have the kidnaping suggestion thus rudely dispelled.

"You must be sure to call Lorella——" Connie began.

"Lorella! Lor-ell-la-la-la!" the boys cried mockingly, until Connie feared their humor might not be understood if it happened to reach the camp.

"Oh, you'll spoil it all," wailed Molly. "Why can't you act civilized?"

"Because they're boys," insinuated Geraldine, but she might better have saved her sarcasm for

more attentive ears. The boys didn't even hear her.

"Now listen!" ordered Mickey, in sheer desperation, for they were all shouting at once, "only a couple of us can go. What would they think if they saw this whole gang?"

"Think we're the Militia, maybe," suggested Ted Manley. "But anyhow, Mickey's right. Just a couple of us should go. Cracky! Look at that—those wagons! They're loaded to the roof. All their house stuff——"

"Hurry, please," begged Connie. "Suppose they should start off. Then where would we be?"

"Left," declared Jeanette. "Go ahead, boys. We'll pretend to be looking at the water——"

"Watching for whales!" laughed Connie, for the little brook beneath the bridge was only wading depth.

Finally Mickey, Ted and Dick started off, and Mickey was to call Lorella as soon as he got to the big chestnut tree, and that was almost alongside the wagon with the old-fashioned gypsy cover —the original canopy top.

Once the embassy fared forth, a silence fell upon those left behind. They just watched, waited and listened. They saw the boys march along, all three abreast as if tramping to some

martial tread. Then they lost sight of the trio, as they left the open lots and entered the thicket behind which the gypsy wagons could be seen.

"I suppose they'll stay talking until we're tired waiting," Margery lost no time in surmising. She did so hate to wait for anything exciting.

"Not much, they won't," declared Tom Duncan. "We've got to get back to the golf links before noon."

Short as the time was before the boys were again sighted, it seemed a long time to the expectant ones.

"There they come," cried Molly, jumping down from her perch on the bridge coping. "And look! What have they got?"

"A goat!" exclaimed Connie. "See! Yes, it really is—a goat!"

"How funny!" screamed Jeanette. "Whatever will you do—— But it's a queer looking goat!"

"It isn't a goat; it's some other animal," declared Connie this time. "And look! There comes old Urania! Oh, mercy me!" and Connie almost fell off her seat on the stone bridge in sheer excitement.

"And the girl!" added Margery. "Look, the whole tribe——"

" 'Tisn't either, the whole tribe," contradicted

Tom, who always loved to contradict Margery. "It's just the old woman and a girl. And the animal is a—deer!" he proclaimed loudly.

"A deer!"

"A little baby deer!"

"The—cutest little deer!"

So said the girls, each adding her tribute of admiration, as the procession headed along toward the bridge, Mickey, Dick and Ted first with the faun-colored little animal walking beside them. The deer's fur was beautifully marked with small white spots, and the graceful little animal seemed rather proud of itself, as the boys led it along, while the old gypsy, Urania, and the young girl, Lorella, followed close behind.

"You don't suppose that's the present!" gasped Connie.

"Certainly. You'll have to have a deer roast," sang out Tom. "Great idea! We might fetch him to the club——"

"Tom Duncan! You just stop," Connie warned. "If that deer is going to be mine it will be a——"

"Pet," assisted Margery, quite pleased with the idea.

By now the party was almost up to the bridge, and Mickey was already calling out to them.

"Lookit! See what we've got."

"It's your present!"

"A Jim-dandy!"

The boys were each offering separate opinions, but they all seemed to agree in the main. The deer was a prize! They shouted that aloud for the world to hear, but not all of the world appeared to be listening.

"Come on," prompted Connie, "let's run down and meet them. I can't wait another minute."

After that it must have been the little deer that was most surprised, for it was so surrounded by the admiring girls and boys that its beautiful eyes blinked unbelievingly.

"Oh, is it really and truly going to be mine!" gasped Connie. "I just can't believe it."

"Yes, it is surely yours," replied Urania, who was standing by, her own faded eyes lighted anew with the spark of admiration kindled by the children. "It is a beautiful deer," she continued, "and we did not steal it."

"No," interrupted Lorella, "we did not steal it. It came to our camp and we fed it and—loved it," she added, a little wistfully.

"Oh, perhaps you want it, Lorella," Connie said, noting the way the girl spoke. "If it is yours I wouldn't take it."

"No, it is not mine, and you'd better take it," answered the girl. "If I had it they'd think I stole it and they'd take it away from me."

"Sure they would," spoke up Mickey, who was already, it seemed, in partnership with Connie on that deer. He was stroking the soft fur and looking over "the points" quite as if it were all his deer, for that matter. The others merely looked on in rapt admiration, just Dick venturing to pat the little animal, which was surely behaving most beautifully under the trying circumstances.

Margery was down on her knees on a clean spot of grass in front of the deer, just gazing, spellbound. Connie stood near Mickey, and she too patted the animal, but the gypsies, now that their present had been delivered to Connie, motioned her aside.

"Let us speak to you," said Lorella, who seemed to sense exactly what her grandmother wished to say.

Connie stepped aside. The others were too interested in the deer to notice anything else.

"Now, I am giving you this animal," said the old Urania, in a most emphatic and carefully spoken declaration, "because you were kind. The deer needs kindness. He is a symbol," and she

held up her browned hand like a priestess in some old painting, Connie thought.

"A symbol," she continued, "of the helpless ones. We are sometimes helpless. My girl, Lorella, needs a friend."

Connie looked from one to the other in astonishment.

"A friend!" she repeated.

"Yes. She goes to school and no one notices her. We are not ignorant"—Connie now saw that the woman was speaking in an even, well-placed voice, with words carefully chosen—"but people think we are, so sometimes we act that way just to fool them," Urania sneered.

"They hate us," spoke up Lorella, her dark eyes flashing indignantly. She could be handsome, Connie thought, if she were not so surly.

"But some day you will meet my girl again," said the old woman, "and then you will be her friend?"

"Why, yes, of course," faltered Connie, feeling as if she were making a solemn promise.

"If you say so, we know you will do it," went on the gypsy. "Maybe you will not meet soon, and maybe you will. But when Lorella needs a friend you will not shun her?"

"No, indeed," said Connie, now gaining con-

fidence and beginning to see that the request was not for some special favor. "If ever I meet Lorella, I shall certainly be glad to remember her. I was telling my mother last night how smart she was."

At that the girl's face seemed to blaze with pleasure. And her grandmother stroked her arm fondly. Now Lorella was handsome.

"Yes, yes," Urania murmured. "My girl is smart. Her mother and her father—they were smart. And so she must have a chance. We are not poor——"

"No, indeed," said Lorella haughtily.

"And the money is hers. She must go to a fine school. Maybe I can ask your mother about it?"

"Why, yes. Mother would advise you," Connie said, just a little uncertainly. "But I'm afraid I must go. The boys have to go back to the links——"

"Yes; and we too must go," said Urania. "You know we are moving to-day." She looked at Lorella standing there in her queer clothes, and then looked at Connie, who was dressed simply as always, but who looked so different.

The gyspy girl instinctively felt that look of criticism, as she turned away with a curl of her

rather heavy lips. She was restless and anxious to move on.

"Too bad you must go with us, Lorella," said the woman; "you do not belong to the tribe. We took her when her mother was sick," Urania explained to Connie, who plainly showed her interest in Lorella. "When her mother died she stayed."

"It's all right for me. Come on, Granny," the girl said curtly. "Let them go with their pet."

"She liked the little deer very much," Urania seemed to apologize for this, as Lorella started off. "But we could not keep him," she decided. "Remember, we did not steal that deer," she repeated very positively. "He came to our camp and we gave him a home; just like Lorella."

"Thank you so much for the deer, Urania," said Connie, her eyes following the retreating girl, "and I'll take good care of him, I promise."

"And if my girl meets you again you will be her friend?" The old woman's voice was raised in entreaty, and Connie knew she was thinking of better days for Lorella.

"Yes, I'll always try to be her friend," was Connie's answer to the gypsy's plea.

CHAPTER XIX

A HORRIBLE WHITE FACE

HER friends surrounding the little deer had been impatient at Connie's delay, especially Molly, who had heard from Mickey (while Connie was talking to the gypsies) that the pipe sale had been held the night before.

It had been Connie's thoughtfulness that caused the great news to be withheld from Molly, for she wanted Molly to have the fun of going to the gypsy camp, and she knew that Molly would not go if she had told her of the big check waiting for delivery. She managed to speak to her without being overheard. But now it was Molly who importuned Connie.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked in an undertone. "Mother has been so discouraged——"

"I wanted you to come, Molly," Connie confessed, "and besides, Mother has gone over with the check by this time——"

"How much?" Molly whispered, impatiently.

Connie made sure that their companions were all intent upon his deership. Then she whispered directly into Molly's waiting ear.

"One hundred and fifty——"

"Never!" exclaimed Molly aloud. Then her face fell into smiles. "I'm going," she announced crisply, and before any one could interpose had they wanted to do so, Molly Sheehan was actually running back over the lots to Main Street, from which thoroughfare she could easily reach her home.

"What's the matter?" asked surprised Jeanette. "Is her mother worse?"

"No, but she just thought of something important," said Connie evasively, finally joining the group again about the little deer.

They led it home triumphantly, to Connie's home, of course, although many and various shelters were offered as being most comfortable for a deer's headquarters. The boys felt they should be left in charge, but the girls didn't see things that way, and Connie insisted that she and Jeanette be allowed full charge, with the boys as aides—if their help should be required.

The deer! A circus complete and entire could not have caused more excitement in Vinelea. Every one wanted to name him, the girls suggest-

ing pretty but inappropriate names such as Margery's "Tenderheart" and Geraldine's "Beauty." Connie felt the deer's name should in some way suggest his wonderful, soft, velvety eyes, but Velvet Eyes was discarded along with the other sentimental titles.

"Pete's the best," insisted Mickey, "and it's easy to call."

"But he'll never come. What's the use of calling?" Dick wanted to know.

"Maybe we can teach him," said Mickey, hopefully.

"He might learn tricks," Ted Manly thought. "Why couldn't he?"

"But his name——" Connie pondered. They were all gathered around the flattered little animal again, the scene having been now shifted to Connie's back yard, where a shed, only used for garden tools, seemed to offer a solution of the housing problem.

"What should we call a little deer?" Margery was analyzing the subject. "What is a little deer?"

"A deer-ie!" burst out Connie. "Of course. Let's just—call him Deerie; why not?"

So Deerie was fed more banana, although he seemed to like the peel best, while new spectators

were constantly joining the group, watching Deerie eat.

"I wish I didn't have to go, but I must," Connie told Jeanette. "I've got to go to Madam Delamar's. She expects me."

"I'll take charge of the deer," Jeanette offered briskly, only too glad of the chance to do so. "Do you want any one to go over the hill with you?"

"If Mickey would come; he knows about things over there, and I hate to go alone since I met the gypsy under the cherry trees," smiled Connie as she recalled that episode.

"But the gypsies are gone now," Jeanette pointed out.

"I know that, but I'm sort of nervous, somehow. I'll ask Mickey to come. He may not mind," Connie reasoned.

He didn't, that is he said he didn't, so the two reluctantly withdrew from the deer party, and, first getting the book that held Molly's elusive picture, Connie and Mickey started over the hill.

It would be futile to attempt to report what they talked about as they went, but it was, in reality, mostly about deer. They couldn't seem to get away from that subject, for children do

so love animals, and this little deer seemed so well worth loving that Connie and Mickey, like the rest, had been fascinated.

"Madam has been asking about you," Mickey reminded his companion, however. "Be sure to remember I told you."

"Oh, I will. I wanted so much to come," Connie recalled. "You know I was almost over here the day I got scared by the gypsy."

"Just so she knows I told you," the boy said again. "I guess she wanted to give you another lesson."

"Oh, do you think so? I haven't brought my brushes or anything," Connie said regretfully. "Shall I go back for them?"

"No; she's got stacks of brushes. Come on. It's kind-a late now, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Connie admitted. "But you see, Mickey, I wanted to show her this picture of Molly."

They paused long enough for Michael to inspect the picture, which he said was "great" and "first rate." Then Connie added her opinion as they hurried along.

Nearing Madam Delamar's, they found Mrs. Manigan was sweeping the porch; Connie was so glad to see her she ran on ahead of Michael.

There was a prompt and brief exchange of civilities, and Michael turned to play with Shaggy while Connie went directly to the studio. Michael was going to wait, he hadn't anything else to do, so he told Connie she need not hurry on his account.

Madam Delamar, for a wonder, was not painting. Neither was she wearing her smock, and she greeted her caller as if she had nothing better in the world to do than entertain her.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "you have been neglecting me. I have no one but you and Michael, you know, and I can't be left alone so long again. Now tell me all your wonderful news," she went on, her lovely face flushing as she talked. "I want to hear all about everything."

For a few moments Connie hesitated. A noise, something heavy, it seemed, had fallen in the direction of the back room, and anything happening there was sure to startle Connie.

"Oh, Aunt Isabel!" called out Madam, in a light, rather affected voice, as if she wanted to apologize for calling, "all right?"

"Yes," came back Aunt Isabel's reply, drawled in a mysterious way, it seemed to the listener. "Nothing happened! Everything is all right; a box fell, that is all."

"I thought so," concluded Madam, at once turning her attention to Connie.

How charming she was! And how Connie loved to tell her everything. The story of the gypsy's gift was most absorbing to Madam, who insisted upon hearing many details that Connie had no idea, at first, of taking her time with. But here again the deer was the magnet of attraction.

"I must come to see your deer; may I?" she asked. "Perhaps I could—paint him!"

"Oh, wouldn't that be perfect!" Connie cried out joyfully. "Just think of having that darling little animal—painted! In a picture!"

"Connie had a little deer!" chanted the lady. "That's really prettier than 'Mary had a little lamb'; isn't it?"

So they talked and talked, and no mention was made of a painting lesson for that afternoon. Finally Connie took her precious little picture from the book—Molly's picture.

"This is what I want to show you," she began. "This is Molly, my friend whose father died lately. Could we do anything with a picture like that?"

"Charm-ing!" said Madam slowly, inspecting

the little snapshot carefully. "What a splendid pose?"

"I thought it was," Connie hurried to agree. "Do you think I might do anything with it?" she asked again. "Could I sell it for post-cards?"

"You dear little business lady! To think of that! I should only have thought of a larger picture; but post-cards are in demand."

"Is that—do you think that would make one?" Connie was pardonably impatient.

"I know exactly how we could manage that," declared Madam, aglow herself now with pleasant anticipation. "I have a business friend who might place that with an agency for us. You have the negative, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I'm saving that," Connie said happily. "You see, Molly, my friend, has to do something to earn money, and we, her school chums, don't want her to leave school."

"Lovely, that you should all want to help her," and Connie thought Madam must have had an unpleasant thought just then, for a cloud seemed to cover her smiles. "Friends!" she exclaimed finally. "How much we all need friends! Since I went to Paris I have lost track of mine."

"You were in Paris a long time?" Connie felt constrained to show some interest in Madam's affairs.

"Yes, for years, busy there. And I had one friend—my dear," she said, her eyes a little shadowy. "I miss that one friend more than you can ever possibly imagine. But——" She smiled again, took Connie's hand in hers and patted it fondly, then said playfully:

"You must not think me a foolish old lady, because we, who devote our very lives to art, seem to need companionship more than they who divide their loves. Can you understand a little, my dear?"

"Yes, indeed I can," declared Connie, "and I'm awfully sorry you lost your friend. Did he—die?"

"No," sighed Madam, "he didn't die. But I neglected him and he thought I had no use for his—his friendship. Ah, me!" she sighed more heavily, "whenever I am finishing a picture I think of him; he loved good pictures with the appreciation of a true artist. But how far we rambled from your friend's picture! We were deciding to give it to a post-card agent, weren't we?"

"That would be wonderful, Madam," Connie

said again, "because Molly needs help—oh, such a lot of help," and it was at this juncture that Connie introduced the subject of the Golf Club benefit.

Madam laughed like a girl over the account of the pipe sale, and the canes! Connie was giving full credit to Mickey when, naturally, as she told of the big returns, she mentioned Mr. Flanger's name.

"Mr. Flanger!" cried Madam Delamar. "Did you say Mr. Flanger!"

"Yes. Mr. Gerard Flanger——"

"Oh, my darling! It is you who have turned fairy!" cried out the lady excitedly. "You are mentioning the name—of my long lost friend!"

"Your friend! The one you thought you had lost!" Connie in her turn exclaimed.

"Yes; the best friend I have ever had. Oh, how wonderful if—if it can really be he! I had no idea he had come back to New York. How shall I find out——"

She was acting like a girl, too excited to know exactly what she was saying, but there was no mistaking the magic effect of Connie's inadvertent remark.

"Let's ask Mickey," Connie suggested. "He knows him well and we could ask him——"

"Yes; call the boy. Oh, I must tell Aunt Isabel. And yet, if it should not be he——"

Without waiting for further advice, Connie hurried out to call Mickey. As she did so she turned instinctively toward the room at the end of the hall. The glass doors from that room into the hall were, as usual, shaded by curtains drawn down. But now Connie saw that one was not down all the way.

The line where the curtain ended was marked by a dim light within the room. Connie looked quickly, stepped just a little toward the door and then she gasped.

"Oh!" She barely breathed, but she still gazed, and—saw within that room something like a hideous, white face!

"Oh," she shuddered again, turning toward the outside door. "What can that be?"

But she found Mickey waiting for her at the very first step of the porch, where he was holding Shaggy down and refusing to toss him any more stones.

"Madam wants you, Mickey," Connie managed to say, wondering if her own face had turned white with the fright she had just encountered.

CHAPTER XX

DEERIE

As she again entered the hall, through the door to the studio, Connie kept very close to Mickey. She knew that she should not spoil Madam's sudden ray of happiness, that whatever that hideous white face was, or was meant to be, she shouldn't now betray the fact that she had glimpsed it.

"Now, here is our little boy who knows everything," she heard Madam address Mickey, "and he shall tell us. Do you know—Mr. Flanger?" She hesitated before uttering the name.

"Sure," said Michael crisply. "I caddy for him."

"Sit down, my dear," Madam directed. "I feel too excited to stand up myself," she admitted, quite breathlessly.

Connie was glad enough to sit down and she chose a chair at the extreme end of the room, away from the other room that came next to the studio toward the rear. She had no wish to see again the face, and how did she know that

it wouldn't poke out through the folding doors?

"And the golfers talk to their caddies, don't they, Michael?" prompted Madam.

"You bet. Tell us everything. Like as if we were dumb."

Connie laughed at that. Mickey was sure to say something funny, but she did hope there had been no mistake about Mr. Flanger. Had he not been the one Madam used to know, Connie would have felt guilty of having made a serious mistake, although, of course, she had done nothing that could have been so construed.

"You must tell me what he looks like," Madam entreated. "I think I may—know him."

"He's a peach," said Mickey; and Connie laughed again.

"Is he large and dark and are his eyes——" Madam got no further. Mickey might not be an authority on size, complexion or eyes, but he knew good points.

"He can make the course in one below par," declared the caddie promptly, which meant of course that the gentleman spoken of was a first-rate golfer; Mickey's ideal of a first-rate man.

"What a boy!" sighed Madam. "Here I cannot wait for news of my friend, to find out if he is this generous gentleman with the same name,

and, yes, the same sort of generosity I used to know. But Michael just tells me he is—a peach!"

Even Michael himself laughed now.

"Gosh, Madam," he said, "I didn't know you wanted me to tell you about his looks. He is big, and has red cheeks and jolly eyes."

"That's splendid, Michael," applauded Madam this time. "I feel sure he must indeed be my lost friend. I have been telling Constance how I lost him. I let my painting take up all my life, all my heart, and so my friends just had to leave me to—my work. But I always get lonely when a picture is almost done."

"Have you finished the big picture?" Connie asked eagerly, at that point.

"Almost. That is why I am resting to-day. I must make my sky heavenly, with just a few wonderful strokes of my brush, and for that my hand must be rested, fresh, what I call a happy hand," and the artist raised her right hand up in a fondling motion, as if she were coaxing it to make for her a very beautiful sky, indeed.

"Skies," repeated Connie. "I love—skies."

"You do, my dear? Then you shall be my favorite pupil, for a sky is like the soul—it has no limits."

Connie's beautiful blonde head was thrown up understandingly, but Mickey, truth to tell, was tossing his impatiently.

"Oh, yes," he said suddenly. "I know now about Mr. Flanger. I remember. *He* never buys any more pictures, he told me, because once he knew an artist——"

"Yes——" interrupted Madam, so eagerly that Mickey almost lost track of what he was saying.

"Some artist he used to know," he continued, "deceived him——"

"Deceived him?" Madam was standing over the boy, rather defiantly now.

"Maybe he said disappointed him," Mickey answered. "You see, the golfers talk to us like I told you, as if we were just another kind of a club and don't know what they are talking about. And we don't, most of the time," he slyly added, with a frank little freckle-eyed wink at Connie.

"I can tell you what Mr. Flanger is like, Madam," offered Connie, who had now recovered her composure sufficiently to take an intelligent part in the broken-up conversation. "He has brown eyes, brown grayish hair, he is rather tall, a little stout, and he has a very hearty laugh."

"My—friend—Gerard!" exclaimed the lady happily, without the slightest restraint. She evidently had no fear of being misunderstood by her juvenile audience.

"Oh, isn't that fine!" exclaimed the slow but sure Mickey, as if the whole subject had suddenly become clear to his stubborn little brain. "If you know him and he knows you—why, maybe you're the artist he has been worrying about," added the simple-minded little boy, just as he might have said to Shaggy, "There's the stone; go get it."

Madam then wanted to know if she could go up to the golf course in the morning and from a distance just see this Mr. Flanger. She wanted to make sure, naturally, before she attempted to let him know where she was.

"He's gone away for a week," said Mickey cruelly. "He went yesterday afternoon."

A smile of resignation spread over Madam's face as she heard that.

"Frankly, my dears, that is better for me," she said, "for then I can finish, quietly, my picture. It must be done—the patron comes to see it finished to-morrow afternoon. And to-morrow morning I shall do the sky. Would you like to see it?"

Their murmured assent was quite unnecessary,

for Madam had gone over to the big easel and was drawing the muslin away from the canvas beneath.

"Oh!" exclaimed Connie. "The old mill and the water wheel! Look, Michael!" she hurried on. "There's the willow tree we always swing on. Isn't that a—wonderful—picture!"

"You like it? And you are a critic for you know the scene," Madame said, smiling. "Well, I came out here to do that for a very rich man who saw the beauty spot while he was motoring through here, and wanted a picture of it. It is done now, all but that little sky. See?"

Connie held her fingers shut very tight as she looked at the oiled canvas. If only her fingers could touch it. They wanted to: she felt them stinging to do so. If only *she* could do anything like that!

As if divining her thoughts, the artist turned to her kindly.

"Your ambition, Constance," she said, "shows in your face, and remember, I am still your fairy godmother. I have been too busy to do much for you this summer, but there is, let us hope, plenty of time ahead for us."

"I have been practicing; I tried to follow the lines you explained to me and I think I am doing

better," Connie replied modestly. "But we have been having so many other things to do——"

"I know; but enjoy your vacation, little girl," Madam said kindly. "That's what vacations are for."

"Sorry, but I've got to go," Mickey interrupted briskly. "Are you coming, Connie?"

"Oh, yes, I must go too," Connie replied quickly. After seeing that white face in the back room she had no idea of staying around there without Mickey.

"Little ones," said Madam, a tinge of foreign accent marking her words, "you have brought me such good news, such wonderful news!" They could not doubt it as they saw her beaming face. "I don't know what to say, or how to express to you what it means. But you must not say anything to Mr. Flanger. I shall have to see him before I can believe it is actually he."

Connie and Mickey turned again toward their homes. They loved Madam Delamar, who had been a very good friend to both of them, and they were now enjoying her anticipation with her.

"Can you beat that?" said Mickey, as a boy would.

"Oh, I am so glad, for Madam does work so hard. And think what it *has* meant for her to

have lost a friend who truly appreciated her art," said Connie. "Isn't it like a new fairy story?"

"It sure is," replied the boy. "And I'll bet Mr. Flanger is in love with her," he added, as innocently as only just such a little fellow could make such a direct yet complex statement.

"In love—with her, Mickey!"

"Why wouldn't he be? Isn't she—just—perfect?" the boy argued. "Who wouldn't love her?"

"Oh, yes, she is perfect. But being in love, you know," Connie pointed out as if she knew, "is so different, Mickey."

"Is it? How different? Isn't almost everybody in love except they're scrappers?"

Connie knew better than to attempt an analysis of that subject, so she dropped it. Besides she wanted to tell Michael about the white face.

"Say," she began just as they turned over Cherry Hill, "you know the mysterious room?"

"With the glass door?"

"Yes. That one there has been so much talk about."

"Who talked about it?"

"Oh, Michael Collins! You know perfectly well what I mean. You can be too tantalizing," and Connie affected a pronounced pout.

"Sure I know what you mean; I just wondered who has been talking about Madam Delamar. They have no right to," Mickey stoutly protested.

"Well, if you don't want to hear——" and she managed to get a few steps in advance of her companion, holding her head up higher than she usually carried it when walking with him. Sometimes boys need to be treated that way.

"Gosh, you're touchy. Of course I want to hear—what?"

"Well," she drawled—the news was too good to pour right out like water—"when I went into Madam's hall this afternoon, or rather when I was coming out to call you——"

"What did you want me for?"

"Madam wanted to ask you about Mr. Flanger, don't you remember?" said Connie irritably.

"Oh, yes, go on."

"I'd be glad if you'll just give me a chance, Mickey." He didn't offer a single word in opposition now. Connie presently continued: "As I came back into the hall I noticed that the glass doors—they are double, you know—hadn't the shades down tight as they always have, and there was a little glimmer of light there."

"Where was the light?"

"In the room back of the glass doors, not in the hall, silly."

"Yes, in the room. That's the back parlor, Mrs. Manigan says," Mickey explained, anxious to do something agreeable.

"Well, the curtain *was* up, about that much." Connie held her hands out in measurement. "And I—looked in!"

"What did you see?"

"A face, a horrible white face!"

"You didn't; honest!"

"Honest, Mickey, it was the whitest face and the most hideous face you could imagine," declared Connie, dramatically.

"Was it only a face? How could it—stand up?"

"It wasn't standing up, it was lying down, seemed to be against something," Connie declared. "Oh, Mickey, I wouldn't go there again alone, not for anything," the girl admitted, for she really was not assuming the fear she showed so plainly.

"You don't have to go alone," declared her champion. "But what I want to know is, whose face was it?"

"But how could we find out?" queried Connie, in perplexity.

"I'll find a way: you wait and see," boasted the boy. "Gosh, look at those kids hanging around that deer yet," he digressed. "Never saw one before, I guess," he remarked cynically, as if deers were as common as cats in Vinelea.

"Mother won't like a crowd like that around," Connie remarked. "He's a lovely deer but——"

"Let me take him. We've got a shed, too, and, you bet, I won't let a crowd stick around unless they're my friends," the boy still bragged. "Want me to take care of him, Connie?"

"Well, we'll see what mother says," the girl answered. "And, Mickey, you mustn't say anything about the face, you know. It wouldn't be fair to Madam."

"Not a word," promised Mickey, racing off to add one more to the crowd of youngsters who surrounded the little animal being petted and called Deerie.

CHAPTER XXI

HER AMBITION

Not even the excitement which Deerie had added to the doings around Vinelea, stirred Connie as deeply as did that glimpse of the curious white face in the room with the glass doors.

"It must be true," she reasoned that night, alone in her room, with Deerie comfortably stalled out in the shed, "there must be something very queer in that room."

Followed the thought of Madam Delamar's acquaintance with Mr. Flanger, of how she had given up all her pleasure and friends to study art abroad, and, most of all, Connie enjoyed recalling the joy, the absolute joy, with which Madam had welcomed the news of Mr. Flanger's presence in Vinelea, right at her very door.

"Suppose they should really be lovers," she ruminated. "Wouldn't it be great for us to help bring them together again?"

Romance, the very flower of youth, was lending its sweetness to her reverie. How lovely

Madam was, and how considerate! How fine Mr. Flanger was and how generous!

"Oh, it would be simply ideal!" she said half aloud. "What a lovely end to my fairy godmother story!"

But suppose he was not her Mr. Flanger! That there might be a mistake——

"Well," sighed Connie, "the wonderful picture is to be finished to-morrow, at any rate. Perhaps when that is out of the way we will then find some way of solving the white face mystery."

But in her sleep she thought she saw the face; it was big and so white and so—hideous.

Next morning her mother had many things to talk over with Connie. First, and most important, was a re-telling or a more complete telling than had been possible to give her the night before, of Mrs. Sheehan's receiving the big surprise check for the pipes.

"You were so excited about your deer," her mother reminded her, "that I could tell you scarcely anything. You see, Mrs. Sheehan is really failing, gradually but really failing, and her anxiety over money matters has added much to her suffering. But when I gave her that check! You should have seen her poor, tired eyes light up, and her smile!" Mrs. Loring stopped a mo-

ment, then continued. "Connie," she said, "her smile made me think of a flickering candle——"

"Oh, Mother, can't she get better?" Connie exclaimed in real distress.

"I'm afraid she can't, dear, but we won't have to worry about Molly being left alone. Your good friend, Mr. Flanger, has gone to see Mrs. Sheehan, and he has arranged for Molly to go to a boarding school."

"Oh, isn't that splendid?" and Connie brightened instantly. "Of course, it will be dreadful if she has to lose her mother, but to have some one to look out for her will make living, at least, easier," Connie reasoned. "She hasn't any near relatives, she told me, and what she has aren't any better off than she is. But, Mother-love, wasn't it wonderful for us to meet Mr. Flanger? And won't it be even more so if he turns out to be Madam's old friend?" She had, of course, told her mother that story directly she returned from the house over the hill.

"Well," sighed the mother happily, "all I can say is that your fairy play has brought you into the fairies' good graces. How else could one account for all these wonderful things?"

"And Mrs. Sheehan was very, very much surprised, Mother? Just what did she say when you

gave her the check?" Connie wanted to know every little detail.

"She couldn't believe that you and Molly had actually managed to get that money," Mrs. Loring explained. "She insisted at first that it had come from the men who had worked with Mr. Sheehan. But when I told her you had really sold the pipes—well, she braced herself up on her elbow and looked up. Connie"—the mother lowered her voice—"she seemed to want to tell —her husband that his pipes, that he loved and cherished, had brought them the much needed money. She is going to have a private room in the hospital and a private nurse now. The check isn't enough for that, but Mr. Flanger will attend to the rest of it privately."

"He must be very rich," mused Connie, hanging up her apron after having finished her morning's tasks.

"Yes, he is. You won't say anything to Molly just yet about boarding school, you know."

"No, indeed. In fact, I shall hate to have her go away," sighed the girl with such yellow curls that the sunshine, stealing in the window, tried to catch their glow.

"And about the deer, Connie. Do you think you should keep him? He must belong on some

reservation," the mother pointed out, reasonably.

"Oh, how could I give him up! I just got him!" wailed Connie, at the moment looking down into the lot where Deerie was contentedly grazing. "And he's so cute, doesn't even try to run away——"

"Very well, you may keep him for a while, but you must not get too fond of him. He may be called for any day, you know," the mother warned her.

"But the gypsies had him a long time——"

"The gypsies haven't a dozen children running in and out their camp to publish their news," said Mrs. Loring. "They are naturally secretive, you know."

"Here comes Mickey!" Connie suddenly exclaimed. "And he's running as if he was being chased by some one."

"Hey, Connie!" called out the boy, before he reached the house. "Come here, I want to tell you something."

Connie lost no time in complying with that request.

"What is it, Mickey?" she demanded. He was sitting on the steps but seemed in just as much of a hurry as if he had still been running.

"Oh, the awfulest thing has happened," he panted. "Madam has burned her right hand! Burned it terribly——"

"Mickey? How? When?"

"This morning. She was doing something with an alcohol lamp and it blazed up and caught her——"

"Did she have a doctor?"

"Certainly. Her hand is all done up in oil and stuff. But, Connie—she can't finish her picture!"

"Oh, how dreadful!" moaned Connie. "And the customer was coming miles to see it to-day."

"Come on over and talk to her——"

"Certainly. Wait just a minute. I must tell Mother," and the girl took scarcely the minute asked for to complete her explanations.

No thought now of the horrible white face. It was only of Madam and her dreadful disappointment that Connie thought.

"After working night and day," she said to Michael, as they hurried along. "Isn't it too mean for words?"

"You'd think so if you saw her face," he replied. "Tears just ran down her cheeks when she looked at that picture. I call it—rotten."

He would, because it was the one word in his

vocabulary that expressed his feelings. It was not a pretty word but it satisfied him.

"It is awful," Connie agreed. "I hope it isn't dreadfully painful."

"It's that picture that hurts," Mickey said whimsically. "Guess she doesn't care much about the burn, but gosh! how she did stare at that picture!"

"And you thought maybe I could cheer her up a little?" Connie, although almost at Madam Delamar's house, was now wondering just why she was going there.

"Yes, sure. She needs some one to talk to. Mrs. Isabel is gone to the city and you know how Mrs. Manigan talks! Like a baseball coach," he added tritely.

Arrived at the house, the side door was as usual open, and also as usual Shaggy was there. He greeted them effusively, wagging his tail frantically, twitching his ears joyfully, and even emitting a few snorts, like words he wanted so badly to say in welcome.

But the children went right in, for Mrs. Manigan told them to, and they found Madam Delamar seated before her picture, working with her eyes instead of with her hands.

She was glad indeed to see Connie; she even

touched the girl's cheek with her lips, a rare display of affection for Madam Delamar.

"It's only the sky, isn't it?" said Connie in a thin little voice.

"Yes," replied Madam, "but just look at it without the sky!"

"I love to paint skies," ventured Connie very timidly. "Do you suppose, if you showed me just how——"

"You angel!" almost yelled the excited artist. "Of course you can do it," and she was already gathering the paint and brushes with her one good hand. "I can mix the paints——"

"I can do that," Connie declared confidently, "and mother says my skies are really pretty good!"

"Swell!" called out Michael. He was quite as overjoyed as were the other two now. He was seeing the sky painted.

They proceeded. Connie wasn't a bit nervous when it came to painting. That was the one thing that seemed so much a part of herself that she had no difficulty in directing her hand, eye and whatever is the other faculty that goes to make up the artist.

"Good!" exclaimed Madam, as the girl pressed her brush to make the edges "roll." She had

only a natural sort of skill, but she was not painting a sky with strokes, she was just coaxing it out with her colors and a gentle brush.

"I have nothing for you to copy from, my dear," sighed Madam next, "but I see you follow your own inspiration. What a blessing you are to me! See, Michael!" she called. "Just see the sky that is coming. Now we know why you have the ambition; it is just a natural gift, the real talent."

"Yes," chimed in Michael, "that's Connie Loring's ambition. Everybody says so, always."

"We must not talk so much," warned Madam, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Now," she directed the girl who was garbed in her own big blue smock, "now, dear, try a few little light, baby, fleecy clouds. Just over there, in the corner."

Intently the real artist watched the work. Michael had very, very quietly stolen out the side door again. That excitement and the responsibility of Connie's effort were too much for him—at close range.

But Connie was going right on with her sky. How splendid it was that she had always practiced on skies!

And now, to work on this wonderful picture!

She scarcely breathed lest she should wake up from a beautiful dream.

A touch here, a little rub there, another blend for the big cloud, and after more than an hour's time of it, Madam simply swung her uninjured arm around Connie and hugged her fiercely. Tears were in her eyes, her voice.

"I can't believe it!" she exclaimed. "It will be almost dry by afternoon and I shall have it ready for that millionaire to inspect. Oh, my dear little girl! Who is the fairy now?"

"It is heavenly to touch a picture like that," murmured Connie. "Madam, I shall never forget this, no matter what else I am ever able to paint."

CHAPTER XXII

THE OTHER GOOD TURN

"I DIDN'T do it; I couldn't have done it. It must have been the fairies."

Connie was still standing there looking at the big picture with her sky drying upon it. It was she who had just expressed that opinion.

Madam Delamar was overjoyed. That little line of sky, that had finished her picture, meant more to her than she could really explain. Baron Barquist was not a patron to stand for excuses, and he was coming to-day by motor from his country place up in New York State, just to take his final critical view of the picture. It just had to be ready for him, and it was.

"You see, my dear," she was telling Connie, "if Aunt Isabel were here she might have done something, for she, too, understands art, but she is in the city, searching for a maid. She will not be back until the four o'clock train. But now we are finished. How I should like to put your name with mine on the picture," she mused. "But I'll

tell you!" and she almost forgot about the sore hand beneath the bandages as she attempted to clasp it in her excitement. "I shall put your initials in the corner, in a color that will only show when it is looked for. Then you can truthfully say you have a signed landscape."

"Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed the little artist. "But I really am satisfied to know it myself. Madam," she asked, her tone suggesting a new subject, "have you been able to do anything about Molly's picture?"

"My dear! To think I should forget. How selfish I am——"

"No, not at all; you have been too busy to think of such trifles," Connie insisted. "But you see, I just can't help worrying about Molly. I meant to tell you, too," the girl continued, "that Mr. Flanger has been to see her mother, and he is willing to arrange to have Molly go to a boarding school——"

"That's Gerard! His heart is the biggest size that ever grows even in a big man," said Madam, gayly. "Oh, how anxious I am to see him! It seems now that this troublesome picture is done —perhaps—perhaps I shall have a real vacation."

Connie was preparing to leave. Michael had been home twice to see about Deerie, and had

now returned with a whistle so positive that Connie knew he meant that she must go if she expected him to escort her over the hill.

"About the post-cards, my dear," Madam this time was determined to explain, "I have sent the picture in by Aunt Isabel. She is a much better business man than I am, and you can depend upon it, she will show the agent what a wonderful post-card the girl on the stone wall will make."

"Would we sell it then?" Connie asked.

"No, we would put it out on royalty, then your little friend would get at least a small sum from the sales as long as the cards sold."

This was indeed good news to Connie, and as she hurried past the suspected room with the glass doors, she barely turned her head. She had so much to tell her mother she couldn't wait an unnecessary moment to begin.

Michael, however, had some news that couldn't wait at all. He blurted it out quickly as they got together for their little journey home.

"The deer," he began, "a man came for him."

"He did! What man?" demanded Connie, sharply.

"A man says he owns him: says the gypsies stole him——"

"They didn't either!" cried Connie indignantly. "Did mother give him my Deerie?"

"No, she didn't. Your mother isn't so quick; she knows better," complimented Mickey. "She told him he would have to come back to see you; that you owned him."

"I'm glad of that. I'll let that man know the gypsies didn't steal that deer," protested Connie. "I'm not going to have any one think Urania is a thief, for I know she isn't."

"Gosh, how you do stick up for folks," Mickey remarked deliberately. "But that's the way to treat friends——"

"I guess you would do the same, Mickey," Connie returned the compliment. "But wasn't it great about Madam's picture?" she digressed. Her joy was greater than her anxiety.

They then fell to reviewing the wonders of a hand-made sky, and Connie could not hide the pardonable pride she felt at directing the hand that made it.

"See any more pale faces?" Mickey asked, just as they reached the summer house. "I mean, behind the glass door."

"No, I hadn't time to look. I was too excited," Connie answered. "But I did see it, really, Mickey. I know I did. I wonder when we will

find out? When we do, then this summer's thrills will all be checked up, won't they?"

"Pretty nearly. But, then, there's Mr. Flanger and Madam——"

"Oh, yes. When is he coming back, Mickey?"

"The caddie master told me to-day to get his clubs ready."

"Then he's expected back soon?"

"Very soon. That caddie man never does anything he doesn't have to," said Mickey dryly.

"But remember, Mickey," warned Connie, "you're not to say a word to Mr. Flanger, if you see him first. Madam wants to take a look and make sure he is the right one. Wouldn't it be mean if he wasn't?"

"He is, sure pop," declared the boy. "And say, Connie, I've got more news. *I'm* going to get a hair cut!"

"Mickey!" and they both laughed gayly. "What a shame to waste those lovely red rings."

"You have to waste gold rings; that's worse," retorted the boy happily. "Well, s'long. I've got to hustle. Hope your man doesn't take Deerie."

"Oh, if he's his, of course he'll have to have him. But he must talk to me about it first," said Connie importantly. "Tell Jeanette and Margery

I'll see them to-morrow. They'll think I've gone to Europe, I guess."

"All right, s'long!" and the boy's flying bare feet were turned up impudently as he capered off.

"Mickey has been so good to me this summer," Connie thought as he went, "he really has been—my little prince."

There was a gentleman in the living-room. Connie heard his voice as she entered the back door.

"After Deerie," she surmised rightly. "I might have known we couldn't have such a lovely, quiet pet."

Mrs. Loring called Connie quickly as she heard her footsteps.

"We have been waiting for you, dear," she began. "This gentleman has come for the deer. He says it belongs to his deer park over the mountains."

Connie's eyes met those of the gentleman being thus introduced.

"I'm really sorry to claim him," he said pleasantly, "especially since he has such a fine home. But deer grow very fast. Presently he wouldn't fit in his quarters."

"Oh, if he is yours of course you must take

him," Connie found herself saying, much to her own surprise.

"He is mine, without a doubt. Your mother has been telling me about the gypsies——"

"But they really didn't steal him," Connie interrupted, feeling she had no right to do so, but was unwilling to await her turn in the conversation. "The old gypsy woman Urania told me to be sure to say that the little deer wandered into their camp, and they gave it a good home. I'm sure that's true."

"That's perfectly all right," the man agreed, and Connie liked his pleasant manner. "But, you see, I offered a reward and I can't take the deer unless you take the reward."

"Oh, really I wouldn't do that," protested Connie, a little indignantly.

"I was sure she wouldn't," her mother added, smiling while the stranger looked perplexed.

"Then I'm afraid I can't take the deer," he said, "much as I should like to. I would be a poor sportsman not to keep my published word."

Connie looked at her mother to see if her face might offer any silent advice. But, other than a smile, there was no clew to be found there.

"It isn't much," the caller pressed, seeing their indecision. "Only twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five dollars!" Connie repeated. "I think that's an awful lot. And you see, I didn't find the deer."

"But he's yours as things stand." He was laying the bills on the table. "Now, be a little business woman and let us settle it," he urged.

"Perhaps you had better, daughter," advised her mother, "for Mr. Sherwood has already wasted a lot of time."

"Now that's better," replied he mentioned as being Mr. Sherwood. "Let's take a look at the little spotted boy. He's in the field, I see." He was looking out the open door and could see the deer in the field down near the row of trees. "My man can lift him right in the back of the depot car. We brought it to fetch him in."

Then Connie went out to say good-by to Deerie. She fondled him, and gave him a fresh banana, and then she saw the man lead the pretty little animal out the gate and lift him bodily into the open, high-topped car.

"I'm glad none of the others are around," sniffed Connie, "they would make a fuss; especially Mickey."

"You really couldn't have cared for him," insisted her mother, as they again entered the house. "Think of his horns——"

"That's so," sighed Connie. "And now, Mother, do you know what—you—we—are going to do with that twenty-five dollars?" She had blinked her tears away.

"What, dear?"

"Buy that new sewing machine you need——"

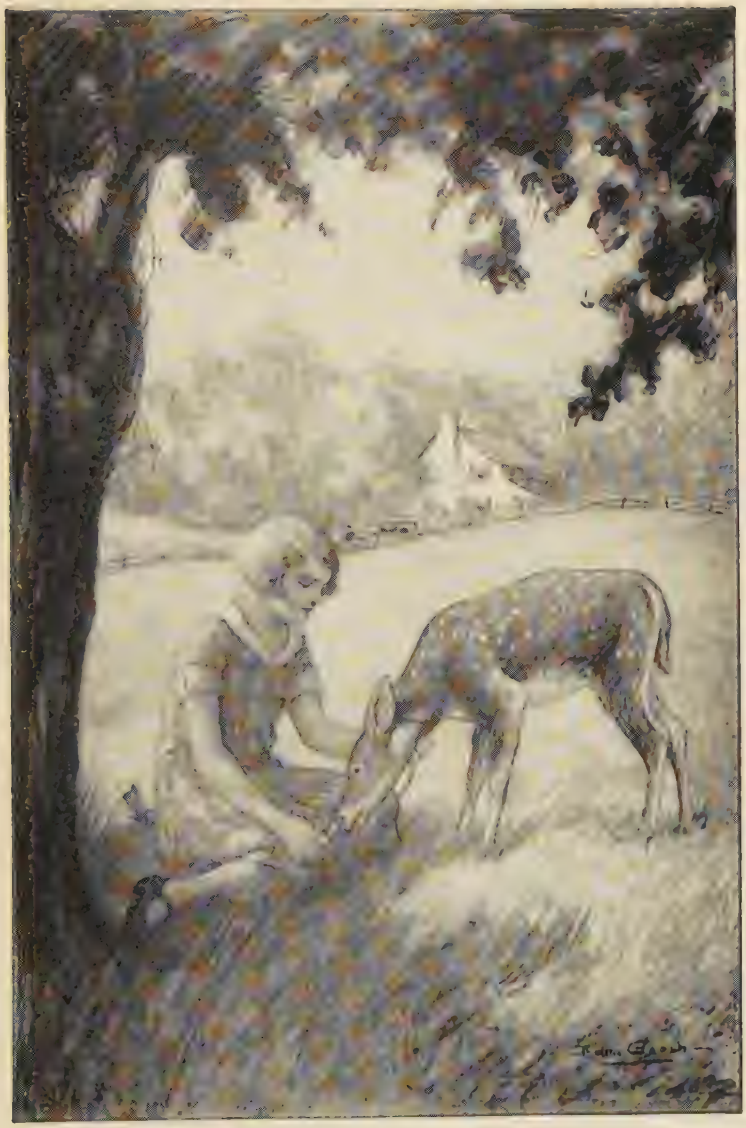
"Connie, you need things——"

"I don't. Besides this is a lot of money and a machine is a big thing. You always said big money should be used for big things. And, Mother-love, I so much want you to have a good machine while you have to sew."

There was a moment of hugging to bind the bargain, and then Connie told the story of the painted sky.

It was almost too wonderful to believe, and as she told it it seemed to grow more wondrous still.

Her mother was simply spellbound. "And you have actually worked upon a real picture!" she exclaimed. "How proud I am of my darling little girl!"



CONNIE WENT OUT TO SAY GOOD-BY TO DEERIE.

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CHAPTER XXIII

HAPPINESS

CONNIE LORING and her mother had much to talk over that night. Was it to be wondered at? What a remarkable summer it had been for them? How bright were Connie's prospects now, with Madam Delamar as her teacher and friend, and the actual accomplishment of a piece of work on an important picture? True, it was small, only a sky, but for a girl practically untaught and untutored to be able to do that much was a rare and remarkable happening, indeed.

Mother and daughter talked of many things besides the hopeful future, for Mrs. Loring now felt the real warmth of her daughter's companionship, realizing that Connie's progress in the past few months had done much to improve her judgment and to make her more helpful as a confidante and companion.

"I have another little secret to divulge," the mother said, when they seemed to have exhausted every possible confidential matter; "it is about Molly."

"Oh, yes, Mother; what about Molly?" asked Connie eagerly, for Molly was never far from Connie's thoughts these days.

"Well, you see, dear, when your father died and you were a tiny tot, I was not left so badly off as Mrs. Sheehan has been. We have always had our home——"

"Yes, Mother," breathed Connie, sensing some noble impulse that her mother was restraining.

"We had this home, and a small income, and I might have managed without working, perhaps. But I loved to work at my fine sewing——"

"You were ambitious," declared the daughter, employing the very term so often used in reference to herself.

"Yes, I suppose that was it. And when one is truly ambitious she is only happy in effort, in attempting to utilize that ambition. But what I started to say was that we are much better off than the Sheehans, and Mrs. Sheehan has an illness which is incurable, so that little Molly is bound to be left an orphan soon."

"How sad, Mother."

"Very. Mr. Flanger is much interested in the case and he is a wise and wealthy man." Mrs. Loring paused and looked far into her daughter's wide eyes. "What would you think, Constance,"

she said, then, "of taking Molly to live—with us?"

"Oh, Mother-love!" cried Connie, instantly jumping up and throwing her arms about her mother's neck. "Could we?"

"Yes, I think so. There, dear, don't choke me, you will need my help if all our plans work out. You see," and again she turned her own lovely eyes toward Connie's little painting on the wall, and her eyes then seemed to be the "grown-ups" of Connie's own, "the house Mrs. Sheehan has been living in," she continued, "will have to be taken back by the Building and Loan."

"Will they lose it—all?"

"I am afraid they have nothing to lose," sighed Mrs. Loring. "But Mr. Flanger feels it is very wrong for Molly to be left in the unhealthy environment with her mother. He insisted that Mrs. Sheehan should be taken to a hospital at once, and I then proposed taking Molly here."

"Mother! You are simply an angel. I do so love Molly, and I really haven't ever had any one——" Connie could hardly shape her words.

"But Mickey," flung in Mrs. Loring, mischievously.

To which Connie retorted with a series of gasps and little giggles. Michael Collins' un-

swerving loyalty was unquestionably of the sterling variety. He seemed to be a born business man and he had found ample opportunity to use his talents in Connie's affairs. They both knew and appreciated this.

"When could she come, Mother?" the surprised girl wanted to know. "It has been dreadful for her in that house of sickness and sorrow——"

"Yes. But don't give me too much credit," her mother remarked. "Mr. Flanger is interested in an organization that will pay a nominal sum weekly for her, and it would not be right for us to undertake anything that might endanger our own humble position, you see."

"That's splendid," declared Connie. "I was worrying a little about that. I wouldn't want you to work any harder, and now it looks as if I shall have to go to art school some day."

And so they talked the hours away.

Could it really now be three days later? Was time like that, going on almost stupidly in spite of all the wonderful and important things happening the world over?

And especially in Vinelea!

Molly had come to Connie's. At first it was to be just a visit, but now she knew that her mother would not be likely to regain her health,

ever, and she realized that Connie's home was to be her refuge from desolation.

The girls were both happy together, but Molly, too, had loved her little home. She could not have been expected, at once, to consider it lost to her; she would have to grow accustomed, gradually, to the change, and in the meantime she was kept very busy indeed visiting the hospital, bringing cheer and some companionship to her patient mother.

Mrs. Loring and other kind friends had already arranged to put the Sheehan furniture in storage, and so the house was taken back privately by the Building and Loan. Molly was young and strong and hopeful. She and Connie would fight together for what happiness they could both cull from the garden of girlhood's adventures. And even for Molly there was promise of many joyful days.

But the important issue of this especial day was the reception at Madam Delamar's. That lady was about to open her house to her neighbors at last, and it was during all the three days that had intervened—since Connie had painted the sky and Baron Berquist had cast critical and approving eyes at the big picture—Mickey had been broadcasting by hand and mouth Madam's invitations.

The girls and boys and their mothers were each and all invited to come and "spend a neighborly afternoon" at Madam Delamar's.

"And now," said Connie to Mickey, as he paused at her door longer than at some others, "now we'll have to see what's in that room with the glass doors."

It was like a picnic, only every one insisted upon dressing up, and one wouldn't for a picnic. But the hour, three o'clock, finally came around, and with it the guests began to arrive at Madam Delamar's.

Everybody invited went. They would. There was as much curiosity about Madam and her home life as there had been about the circus; and it cost nothing to go to Madam's.

Connie, Molly, Jeanette and Margery were sure to be on time, and they got there just as a group of women, surely there were ten of them, puffed up the long drive. They did the puffing themselves as they came afoot. Mrs. Loring and Jeanette's mother, Mrs. Duncan, were together, acting as sort of leaders for the others.

The girls hung back a little to allow their elders the right of way. Then, when the ladies were safely upon the porch and the door was

opened wider—it had been open all day likely—the girls ventured forth.

"Wait for us! Hey!" yelled a voice unmistakably Mickey's, and the girls stood still in their tracks. Finally the entire group got together, while Connie and Mickey, being most familiar with the territory, were urged to lead the way.

A figure, a costumed figure, awaited to receive them.

"Oh!" cried out Connie joyfully. "My fairy godmother!"

"No one else," answered the smiling lady, who did not in this scene wear a mask. She received her surprised guests with the same easy grace and was wearing the same identical costume that she had worn on that first eventful night when she "appeared" to Connie in the summer house.

"Oh, Connie," cried happy little Margery, "you should have worn your Cinderella costume."

"And have your prince along," suggested Molly, shyly.

"I have him," Connie promptly replied, giving Mickey's arm such a pinch that he drew away in a fashion rather cowardly for a prince.

Aunt Isabel and Mrs. Manigan were handing around tea and little cakes, and Madam Delamar

was inviting the visitors to make themselves at home, to look at the pictures and at anything that interested them.

The glass doors of the mysterious room were open!

Connie and Mickey both saw this at the same time.

"Come on," he whispered. "I'm going in!"

"No, don't." Connie detained him. "Perhaps we're not supposed to."

"We are too, or the doors wouldn't be open," argued the self-confident, freckle-faced Michael Collins, junior. He was heading straight for that door.

Madam saw him. She smiled pleasantly and beckoned to Connie.

"Perhaps," she said, "your friends will like to see Aunt Isabel's work. It is in there, safely protected to-day. But you may go in. I'll call her to take you in and explain."

Connie was breathless.

"At last!" she was almost saying aloud, she thought it so strongly, "we will see what that white face is."

Mickey waited, albeit impatiently. The girls and the other two boys, Ted Manly and Tom Duncan, were all waiting together. Presently

Aunt Isabel got rid of her tray and joined the waiting group.

"You want to see my death masks!" she said, politely.

"Death masks!" exclaimed both Connie and Mickey, too astounded to restrain their surprise.

"Yes. Come right in. They are all dry now so I do not have to be so very, very careful." She led the little procession into that room and there, arranged on high, narrow tables, was not one hideous white face, but a number of them!

"Oh," Connie could not help exclaiming, "I saw that one once through the glass door——"

"Did it frighten you?" asked Aunt Isabel, picking up the mask and holding it for inspection. "Do you know, our Jap cook was so afraid of my poor, harmless plaster faces, he just wouldn't stay with us?"

"They are awful looking," Mickey had the temerity to say, right to Aunt Isabel.

"Yes, they are indeed," she admitted, but nevertheless, she kept looking at the one she held as if it were quite beautiful; she sort of fondled it.

"What are they for?" asked Margery, wide-eyed.

"These are for a museum," Aunt Isabel re-

plied. "You see, I finish them. This is the mask of a great actor and is for an historical society." She proudly displayed the plaster face and Jeanette thought she knew who the actor had been.

Connie and Mickey were naturally the ones most interested. They were quite speechless except for exclaiming at intervals:

"Death masks!"

"And that was what scared Chang away," Mickey finally murmured, scornfully. He was even touching a mask now, trying to find out what it was made of.

"While they are being retouched in spots," explained the sculptor, "I have to keep changing their position. Sometimes I need a little light, just a soft light, and then I take them near a window. That was the way Chang saw one. But I didn't dare let him come in here. He was so superstitious he might have utterly ruined any of them, and, of course, none could ever be replaced."

They all inspected the masks now and marveled repeatedly, until a slight commotion out in the living room attracted their attention.

"Come on," whispered Jeanette, "let's see what's going on."

"It's Mr. Flanger!" exclaimed Connie, who

was the first to reach the hall. "Oh, Mickey, see! He's Madam's Mr. Flanger!"

"Sure he is," replied Mickey easily. "Didn't you know that before?"

Everybody was standing around the fairy godmother, and Mr. Flanger had his arm drawn through her black velvet sleeve.

"You see, my friends," he was saying, "this is really a very auspicious occasion. And the youngsters here have done a lot toward bringing it about."

"Who?" whispered Margery.

"Me and Connie," replied Mickey, inelegantly.

"Sh-s-s-s-s!" hissed the ones who objected to the interruption. But the speaker was still talking.

"As a matter of fact," he said, his jolly eyes and red-gray hair and his general description as given once by Connie and Mickey, standing well the present critical ordeal, "Madam and I are old friends, very old friends. We have not seen much of each other for some time, however, but now——"

He paused. Madam smiled beautifully, every one thought. She was so "darling looking" the girls were wont to murmur. But the romantic drama continued with Mr. Flanger and Madam

as the principals, the visitors as the audience and Connie and Mickey—what were they, anyhow, in that play?

"We really have an announcement to make," said Mr. Flanger, gazing down at Madam with affectionate admiration.

"I told you he was in love with her!" blurted out Mickey, a little too loudly to make it a whisper.

"Just imagine! So you did!" Connie Loring was forced to admit.

CHAPTER XXIV

CELEBRATING

In the way of surprises that day had surely been overcrowded.

"Things happen like that, don't they?" Mickey asked and answered when he and the boys met the next day on their way to the golf grounds.

"But the death masks," Tom Duncan remarked, "weren't they queer? No wonder the old Jap was afraid of them. They're the worst looking things I ever saw."

"I've seen them in the New York museum," Ted Manley told his friends, "and I guess, maybe, they're just like the Delamars."

"Sure they are," insisted Mickey. "The Delamars do the very best kind of work. Say, fellers," he broke off suddenly, "this is going to be one awfully hot day! Hope our players won't feel too frisky."

"Bet they want to go the round twice," grumbled George Preston, who was the fattest caddie on the links. "I think we ought to knock off on a day like this."

"George, you'd just as soon knock off in a blizzard as in a sizzard, wouldn't you?" Tom reminded the indolent one. "But all the same, fellers, it is getting hot," he admitted.

The boys were in no apparent hurry to reach the links, and when a variety of colors, merged together, broke over the green at Maple Avenue, recognizing the colors as belonging to the girls who were wearing them, the caddies were glad of interruption.

"Say, look who's coming," sang out Dick Lawrence. He wasn't caddying, but he liked to play around the course. "The girls must be going on——"

"A picnic!" called out Margery, who was sure to make the important announcement first. "We're all going! You too!"

"We are, eh? Who said so?" demanded the practical Mickey. "Whose picnic is this?"

"Delamars and—and Flangers——" But Margery was not allowed to proceed further, for the group of girls had by this time caught up to the group of boys, and the matter of a picnic was being discussed more intelligently.

"You see," Connie told the boys, "Mr. Flanger is really going to marry Madam Delamar——"

"And he would never have found her if it

hadn't been for you, Connie," Mickey complimented the girl in the green gingham dress.

"Now, Mickey Collins!" Connie retorted. "I'd just like to know if you didn't do the most of it?"

"What I'd like to know," drawled George, the fat boy, flopping right down on the roadside and allowing the golf bag he should have been carrying to flop down with him, "is where's that picnic."

"We're all going to meet at Second Mountain at half past nine," Jeanette had finally a chance to say, "and you boys are to go over to the club and collect all the other boys."

"Who's going to collect George?" Dick Lawrence wanted to know. "The way he's scattering himself around now it looks as if it would take quite a crowd——"

"Now, Dicky," George broke in, "you needn't try to be so funny. I was the one who wished for the picnic anyhow," he boasted. George really was covering quite some territory.

"Well," Connie told everybody, "if you don't all hurry along we'll lose a lot of fun, for we're going in the big, old stage-coach——"

"In Henderson's stage-coach? The double decker?" Ted Manley all but yelled.

"Yes," Connie went on. "That is, some of us are going in the stage-coach, because Madam wants a picture of it. But any one who is afraid to ride over the mountain in it can go in an auto."

"Afraid! Say, that stage-coach has been in a circus," Dick Lawrence recalled, "and when it didn't 'bust' then it never will. Me for the stage-coach!" he yelled, and there was a general tossing up of caps to give approval to the proposed ride in the relic that was more than a landmark to Vinelea.

"How many are going?" Tom inquired next.

"Madam said we were to tell everybody," Margery insisted gleefully.

"And Mr. Flanger said you were to tell all the boys, Mickey," Connie further stated by way of giving orders.

"That's because of the wedding, I suppose," Mickey remarked dryly.

"Wedding! There isn't any wedding yet!" exclaimed Margery.

"And you only wish there was," Mickey teased. "Gosh, Marge, you do like more things to happen——"

"Don't you?" snapped Margery, jabbing her good handkerchief into her pocket without folding the embroidery outside.

"Well, wasn't yesterday as good as a wedding?" Mickey argued. "I'd like to know if it didn't just look like one up there at Delamars', with all the folks around and everything?"

"Well, do run along, boys," Connie begged. "It's going to be the hottest day we've had, and if we don't get down to the lake by ten o'clock some other picnickers will have all the fun."

"And they've got a new swing, a dandy," Ted announced. "But how do we know we can get off?" he worried. "Suppose Mr. Thornton wants me to lug his bag?"

"Don't you understand?" Connie exclaimed impatiently. "Mr. Flanger has arranged for *all* the caddies to go, and Madam Delamar is going to take the girls."

"Oh," and Mickey let his mouth drop comically with the word, "I see. We are not going on the same picnic——"

"If you don't hurry along, Mickey Collins, you'll not go on any picnic," Jeanette said severely. She was not as fond of Mickey as Connie was; in fact, she wasn't sure about a number of the boys who earned money at the golf links. Which was not very liberal of Jeanette, for the schoolboys who put in hours carrying golf bags over the green were surely more

to be praised than the boys who merely idled all vacation.

It did seem as if the party would never get under way, for just as a half dozen girls would get together and apparently be ready to meet another group, some one would think of some one else who didn't know about the picnic and there would be a rush made to inform the delinquent.

But at last a really good-sized crowd had assembled, the girls now in one party all around the Big Tree, while the boys waited by the road. There was so much to talk about, after the surprising happenings of the day previous, that it seemed like a picnic even before the autos arrived. But when a blast from a regular coaching bugle sounded over the mountain, and then the old stage-coach came rattling over the hill, both boys and girls forgot all about their separate parties and joined in greeting the arrival.

"Here she comes! Here she comes!" a shout went up.

"Oh, see the bugler!"

"Who's driving?"

"Wherever did they get the fancy horses?" It was Geraldine who asked that.

"Why, they're Flanger's, of course," Connie

said loftily. "Mr. Flanger has some wonderful horses——"

But the approach of the stage-coach made further remarks about mere horses quite unnecessary. For the funny old coach looked, indeed, like some circus relic, with the windows picturesquely battered in, and the seats on the roof only partially protected by what was once a railing, but now looked more like a picket fence near a good apple tree.

Tom Larkin, the livery man, was driving. In fact he owned the curious old vehicle, and would scarcely trust any one else to drive it. He never rented it out, nor even took it out himself, except upon very rare occasions and for a real consideration in money.

In an auto, driving as near the old coach as good judgment permitted, were Madam Delamar and Aunt Isabel, besides Mrs. Loring, Mrs. Richards, Mrs. Lawrence and several other ladies, for they rode in the big touring car and it accommodated quite a number.

But the car for the real picnic was a big truck, brought up from Montclair and fitted out with side seats and floor seats, and seats in every available spot. Mr. Flanger jumped down from his perch on the stage-coach and promptly undertook

to "sort out" the party. He it was who had been doing the bugling, and as he directed the boys to "pile into" the first truck he blew some jolly blasts that rang merrily over the hills and must have sounded like the real coaching times to the old residents of the mountain towns.

To the disappointment of some of the girls, especially Connie, it was decided that the coach should be occupied only by a few of the older boys and Mr. Flanger, with his guest, Mr. Thornton.

"We have got to have the coach in the picture," Mr. Flanger explained, "but going down that hill isn't just like it used to be when a horse was king of the road. The auto is king now, and we don't want any smash-ups."

"But you girls will have a chance to have your pictures taken in the coach when we get to the lake," Madam Delamar promised, noticing the disappointment which had spoiled so many smiles upon the girls' faces when the boys alone were selected for the coveted ride.

Finally they all started off, and it must be said to the credit of those two handsome horses of Mr. Flanger's that they behaved beautifully in front of the novel contraption that made so much noise at their heels.

"And we haven't any brakes on either,"

Mickey said in Tom's ear, as the coach crowded dangerously near the horses.

"Swell!" was all Tom could say, as they jogged along, Mr. Flanger blowing the bugle bravely, and blast after blast cutting through the morning sunshine, which had not turned out to be quite so unbearably hot as George had predicted.

All went merrily until the leading auto, that in which the ladies were riding, drew up suddenly to let a car from a side street pass. That halted the procession, the girls' truck stopping next, and then——

"Look out!" Every one seemed to yell the warning at once. But no warning could prevent what happened.

Old Jerry Dolan, the tin peddler, was actually parking his flivver in the very path of the stage-coach!

In an instant the horses had been pulled up and were stopped, but the balky car was not so easily managed. Jerry Dolan must have "lost his head" at the sight of the stage-coach, the boys insisted, for whatever he did to the car he stalled it, and with so sudden a "stall" that the horses, in spite of their very best behavior, could not avoid kicking the peddler's car as they jumped the traces, sending his tins flying all over the broad highway.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LATEST PICTURE

And the noise of flying tins is surely the most resounding of all noises.

Jerry was out on the road as quickly as his surprise allowed him to get there. He was trying to protest, but the tins kept on flying, for the horses were now being piloted out of the mix-up and they seemed to enjoy kicking the car as they went. Every kick brought forth a shower.

It was remarkable how quickly the trucks, cars and coach were unloaded. All hands seemed to be upon the road now, although a few girls clung to their places in the truck, not willing to give them up lest they could not so easily recover them.

"Some picnic!" exclaimed Mickey. And what he meant was that it was just as good as the other picnic promised.

"A tin shower for Madam," suggested Connie brightly. "But it's too bad, just the same, for Jerry's wife is sick, and I suppose this will spoil his day."

"But *our* picnic!" wailed Margery.

"Oh, *your* picnic!" mimicked Ted. "What's the matter with this?"

"I've got to tell Madam about Jerry's wife being sick," Connie continued to fret, although she was managing also to gather up some pie pans.

It was funny to see everybody trying to garner the tins, for they had rolled all over the road, and autos were coming both up and down the hill. And there had been so many tins spilled!

"Whatever is this?" Jeanette wanted to know, holding up a fancy cutter for potatoes.

No one informed her, so she dropped it into the long box in the back of the peddler's car.

"Hey, there!" called out Tom to George. "You can't play tambourines with those cake tins. Hurry up! We're going to a picnic—maybe!"

But the lure of a very large egg-beater was too much for Ted Battin, and he deliberately ground it around and around, while he pretended to sing a tune to the grind.

The youngsters were enjoying themselves, in spite of the mishap, while Mrs. Loring, Madam Delamar and the other ladies were talking about the peddler. Their car, like the others, had been drawn up to the roadside, and while the children

scurried about after the tins the ladies discussed the situation.

"Did Connie say the man's wife is ill?" Madam Delamar wanted to know.

"Connie seems to know," her mother replied vaguely. "I don't see how she does know so much about folks, though," she added, her surprise that Connie should be acquainted with the poor man's troubles being in no way assumed.

Madam smiled. "She is naturally interested in the picturesque, you see," she said, "and what could be more picturesque than that old tin cart? But here comes Connie now," Madam interrupted herself. "Do you suppose she wants—wants to sell the tins to us?"

"Oh, Madam!" Connie was calling as she came. "Couldn't we run down to Montclair and bring back the moving picture man to take a movie of this? Just see how funny it is? And he would pay Jerry——"

"There!" declared Madam, with a laugh. "Didn't I tell you she would want to do something for that man? Connie, that's a famous idea," she answered the waiting girl. "Jump in and we'll go after your photographer, if you know where to find him."

Word of the "big idea," as Dick called it,

was soon scattered as widely as the tins, and while those upon the hillside made such preparation to wait as the situation demanded, Connie jumped into the ladies' car and presently was rolling in it down the big hill to Montclair.

She was again all keyed up to the new excitement.

"I thought almost everything had happened yesterday," she said rather timidly to Madam as they raced along, "but if we can do something for old Jerry—— Mother, you know nice old Kate, don't you? She used to come around selling pins," Connie reminded her mother, who was with the party going after the photographer.

"Why, yes, indeed I do. Is Kate Jerry's wife?" Mrs. Loring asked in surprise.

"Yes, and she's sick, and he has to take care of her besides peddling," said Connie. "I went over there the other day with Margery to gather mint, and we stopped at the spring for a drink," she explained. "That's how I knew," finished Connie, with a show of interest.

"But how did you know about the motion picture man?" Mrs. Loring asked, casting a significant side look at Mrs. Lawrence.

"Why, didn't you know? He might get the prize offered by the news reel agency for the most

novel picture of the month—provided he gets this one, and what could be funnier than our old stage-coach and Jerry's tins?"

No one said anything to that, but at least two of the party were thinking exactly the same thing. Her ambition! Connie must be at pictures of some kind.

"There he goes!" she called out suddenly, as the chauffeur turned the car out on the avenue. "See the man with the big camera? That's Mr. Benson. Can we catch him?"

They caught him without any trouble whatever, for the car simply headed off the man with the tripod, by making a sharp turn.

When all explanations had been made and the party was again back on the hilltop, joining the waiting group there, it did seem as if almost everything worth while had happened. But in the crowd which had gathered around the old stage-coach and the tin peddler's car Connie quickly espied a newcomer; it was Lorella, the gypsy girl. And she too would be in the picture!

"We must move over from the road for all this," Mr. Flanger explained to Madam, and even the most casual observer could see how happy he was to say anything to that lady.

"We can go over on the pretty side street

and pose in the old grove there," Madam replied, smiling so sweetly into Mr. Flanger's face that Mickey, who had just happened to look that way, not only kicked his own shins foolishly, but also bit his poor, unoffending tongue.

What happened after that was recorded in a most interesting way in the local paper a few days later, for it seems Walter Benson, the photographer, took first prize in a news reel competition for the most novel picture of the month. And the picture was genuine photographs of an accident on the mountain road, in which the famous old stage-coach collided with the almost equally famous flivver of Jerry Dolan, the well-known tin peddler.

"But poor little Molly wasn't in it at all," sighed Connie as she read the report. She had been waiting at the corner for the very first bunch of papers to be thrown off the trolley at Baker's Corner. Jeanette was with her. "Molly was at the hospital with her mother," she said sadly.

"Connie," spoke up Jeanette, after she too had glanced over the thrilling headlines in the paper, "I do believe when one has an ambition like yours everything just seems to—sort of favor it," she ended a little uncertainly.

"Favor it?" repeated Connie. "If you ever knew, Jeanette, how scared I was going up to Madam Delamar's all summer, with that Jap running away because he was afraid of something there, and Mickey being so—so queer about it all. Really, Jeanette, I did think there might have been a lunatic in that room," she at last admitted.

"And yet you went, all alone?"

"But I wanted to go, to get my lessons," Connie declared. "And, besides, I do love Madam Delamar," she could not help admitting that also.

"Well," sighed Jeanette, "we've had a wonderful time all summer, and I guess every one enjoyed the picnic," she finished, "in spite of it being held in the afternoon."

"Even poor old Jerry," added Connie, just as Mickey Collins came running along waving his papers with the same important news.

"He got it! He got it!" he cried out joyfully. "Hey, Connie! Maybe the movie picture will be just as good—I mean will be worth as much as the oil painting you put the sky in," he suggested, still waving the newspaper. It was perfectly plain in what direction Mickey's talent lay.

"Of course it's *one* kind of a picture," replied Connie critically, "but then—— Oh, well, I'm

glad, anyway, that Mr. Benson did get a good picture. You see, he used to be a real artist, but he says—it didn't pay." She even knew all that.

"Better buy yourself a camera, Connie," Mickey hinted mischievously.

But Connie was too busy looking at the colors on the hills to hear what he said. She was evidently studying a newer and prettier picture for her next attempt.

"Don't dream now, Connie," Jeanette warned her chum. "We've got to get over to Margery's, you know. I promised I'd buy her a paper."

Mickey had started off, but now turned back again.

"Hey, Connie," he called, as he so often did, "there's Jerry Dolan! Look! He's got a new car!"

"So he has," replied Connie in surprise. "And we hoped he'd save that picture money to use for poor old Kate. A new car!" she repeated, gazing at the auto that now had been parked at the curb.

Jerry Dolan got out of it. A new Jerry he appeared to be, for he was "fixed up" in new clothes for him, if they were not exactly new from the store. And he did look so much better than usual.

"Why, Jerry!" exclaimed Jeanette in surprise. "What's all this?"

"I'm in the picture business now," replied the man, spreading his smile for Connie's benefit. "I'm driving for Walter Benson. No more selling tins for me!" he finished, rubbing his hand—it was still a little grimy—over the hood of the newly-painted car. "Ain't she a beauty?" he wanted to know, referring to the car, of course.

"Sure is," agreed Mickey, grinning happily. "And I know some one else goin' in th' picture business, too," he could not refrain from saying.

"Please stop, Mickey," Connie begged. But, somehow, just seeing old Jerry smile at that repainted car sent her imagination soaring until Jeanette once more reminded her that Margery was waiting for the news.

THE END

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THE RIDDLE CLUB THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

This volume takes in a great number of winter sports, including skating and sledding and the building of a huge snowman. It also gives the particulars of how the club treasurer lost the dues entrusted to his care and what the melting of the great snowman revealed.

THE RIDDLE CLUB AT SUNRISE BEACH

This volume tells how the club journeyed to the seashore and how they not only kept up their riddles but likewise had good times on the sand and on the water. Once they got lost in a fog and are marooned on an island. Here they made a discovery that greatly pleased the folks at home.

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